

THE MOST
HERETICAL
LAST BOSS QUEEN
FROM VILLAINESS TO SAVIOR

NOVEL **3**

Written by
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 1:

The Tyrannical Princess and the Fiancé

THERE ONCE EXISTED an otome game called *Our Ray of Light*. The hugely popular ORL turned into an even longer series thanks to fan support. For eighteen years, I lived an ordinary life with ORL as one of my greatest guilty pleasures.

Then everything changed.

“Pride, how are you feeling? You can let me know if something’s wrong.” Stale, my younger brother-in-law, watched me with a gentle gaze. Those dark eyes observed from behind black-framed glasses. His hair, just as inky black, lay neatly styled around his face.

This boy was the firstborn prince of our kingdom. He would turn fifteen this year, but it wasn’t so long ago that he was just a seven-year-old commoner adopted by the royal family. Stale was my dearest brother even though we shared no blood. When I became queen, he would become my right-hand man and seneschal. Already, he served as my steward, ever at my side.

Stale’s special ability to teleport aided in his duties, allowing him to appear at any location he’d been to—or knew the coordinates of—regardless of distance. It was an excellent power indeed. He could even teleport to a specific person’s location simply by knowing what kind of person they were. And it wasn’t just himself he could teleport—he could move up to four other people.

All of this put his special power far above most others. Stale had always had a good head on his shoulders, but it filled me with pride that now everyone saw him for the wise prince and eminent genius he was.

“I’m so looking forward to tomorrow, Big Sister!”

My younger sister, Tiara, gripped my hand and grinned up at me. The second-born princess had wavy golden hair and matching golden eyes, a true angel. She was two years my junior and one year younger than Stale.

“So am I, although...I’m a bit nervous too,” I said, offering my siblings a forced smile.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be there with you,” Stale said.

“I’ll be there too!” Tiara said.

A wave of relief washed through me. Pride Royal Ivy. With wavy red hair and sharp purple eyes, I was the firstborn princess of our kingdom.

This land—the kingdom of Freesia—was the only country where people with special powers were born. As the firstborn princess in a country ruled by queens, I became the crown princess eight years ago. It wasn’t just lineage, though. My special power, precognition, also awakened at that time.

Recently, Stale and Tiara seemed to study me more closely. Even now, as the three of us gathered in my room, they pursed their lips and furrowed their brows. I had a hunch as to why...

Tomorrow was my sixteenth birthday.

In our kingdom, women were considered adults at the age of sixteen, while men reached adulthood at seventeen. That meant tomorrow’s birthday celebration would be a very special occasion. If I failed to display my aptitude as the future queen, or caused the slightest trouble, I’d face a fate worse than nasty rumors. My very position in the royal family could fall into turmoil. Over the last six months, I had been proposing joint laws between Freesia and our allied countries. My mother, the current Freesian queen, was working toward this end as well, but she put me in charge of the creation of a school system for children throughout the kingdom, complete with formal presentations. I couldn’t afford to jeopardize all that at my birthday party.

“I’ll do whatever I can to ensure tomorrow’s birthday party goes off without a hitch.”

This time, it was Prime Minister Gilbert, who’d just finished drafting the final preparations. He thumbed through the materials as he smiled at me. Prime Minister Gilbert was my father’s assistant and one of the officials helping me with the school system, among other duties. I was eternally grateful.

Along with a sharp mind, he also had the special power of age control. It

made his exact age tough to pin down. He had light blue hair tied back in a ponytail that draped over his shoulder and shrewd, almond-shaped eyes.

“Thank you, Prime Minister,” I said.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I serve the people, I serve Your Highness, and I serve the royal family. I’ll be at your side when it’s time to announce your school system. Additionally...”

Prime Minister Gilbert suddenly fell silent. He cocked his head and looked past me at Stale, his expression hardening. “Actually, let’s save this conversation for another time,” he said, exiting with a simple bow.

When I searched for Stale, I found a dark look clouding his face as he glared after the prime minister. What was that about? At the very least, he wasn’t quite as heated today as I’d seen him in the past. Maybe he wasn’t feeling well.

Tiara noticed too. “Stale, are you all right?”

He jolted out of his daze. “Sorry, I was just thinking about something. I’m okay.”

Stale smiled at us, but I could still tell that something was wrong. Maybe he was just nervous about the big day tomorrow. It probably didn’t help that I was uneasy myself.

“I have to go practice with Arthur,” Stale added. “What’s next for you, Pride?”

“I still have the final adjustments for tomorrow. Tell Arthur I look forward to seeing him then.”

Some of the tension in Stale’s face eased. “I will,” he said before bidding us farewell. Tiara left too, saying she needed to look over her dress before tomorrow.

They really are acting weird...

I tilted my head. With tomorrow’s ceremony ahead of us, I couldn’t take my mind off my adorable siblings’ strange behavior. They appeared in my life eight years ago and now we were close as could be. It made their subtle changes all the more concerning to me.

They weren’t the only change to my life eight years ago.

That was the time when I first gained my power of precognition, considered the divine revelation of the future ruler, and became the official crown princess. I then learned of Tiara, whose existence had been hidden from me, and gained Stale as an adopted brother. Those were enormous changes on their own, but that wasn't the end of it.

The same day that my precognition awakened, I also regained the memories of my past life. Once, I was an ordinary eighteen-year-old. This world with special powers and Tiara and Stale and all the rest came from an otome game I'd obsessed over—*Our Ray of Light*, the plot of which started two years from now. Tiara was the game's heroine, with Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert as two of her potential love interests. Another was Arthur Beresford, my imperial knight.

I played through the entire ORL series in my past life, but my favorite game was the third one, so my memories of the first game remained hazy. At first, I remembered little but the basic details. All I knew for sure was that I was the heroine Tiara's older sister. I was also the wicked final boss of the entire game.

Pride.

I was the queen who committed all kinds of irreparable evil, scarring the hearts of Tiara's love interests. In the final moments of the game, Pride received punishment for her many sins. Tiara was the one to heal her love interests and stand up with them to oppose Pride.

I still couldn't remember anything about the remaining love interests, but the more pressing matter for now was tomorrow's announcement at my birthday party. I knew I had to avoid embarrassing myself, be it as a princess, as the heir to the throne, or as an older sister.

Clang! Clack! Schwing!

"Take that! You're slacking today, Stale!"

"I...know that!"

I batted Arthur's sword aside as we sparred in my practice room within the castle.

Arthur Beresford was turning would turn eighteen this year and belonged to the main forces of the Freesian royal order. He was my best friend, someone I'd come to admire. He kept his long silver hair tied back in a ponytail. His blue eyes were intense as he prepared to strike. In addition to his prowess in battle, he had a special power that could cure any and all disease.

Gritting my teeth, I met Arthur's next onslaught. I managed to dodge, but I couldn't shake his criticism. He was right; I *was* slacking today. I couldn't stop thinking about it, and soon Arthur ramped up his attacks and overwhelmed me.

"I thought...I warned you already!" Arthur said.

He lunged and knocked my sword away. Thrusting his blade at my neck, he shouted victoriously before I even had time to give up.

"If you've got somethin' to say, then tell me, damn it!" Arthur said. "You've been actin' all weird lately."

I bit my tongue and lowered my sword. There was no use fighting it. Arthur had seen right through me.

"Elder Sister's birthday party is tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know. I'll be there as her imperial knight."

"She said she looks forward to seeing you tomorrow," I said with a nod. I offered a paltry thrust, but Arthur swept it aside, metal bouncing off metal with a light *clang*. He then struck back, forcing me to fall back on defense, but the duet of our swords grew softer and more sporadic.

"Big Sister turns sixteen tomorrow," I said, diving in for a few quick strikes.

Arthur blocked my jabs, hardly seeming to pay attention as he effortlessly swatted me away.

"I know. She's grown up into a real woman already," he said with a nod.

"At tomorrow's party, Mother is going to announce Elder Sister's fiancé."

Arthur finally faltered, his attacks letting up. He went quiet.

"I don't think she remembers that it's coming," I went on. "That's how focused she's been on implementing her school system lately. Tiara, Gilbert,

and I don't want to break her concentration, so we haven't brought it up."

"But everyone knows about it, right?" Arthur said. "All the women of the royal family learn of their fiancé from the queen when they turn sixteen. That's how it worked for Her Majesty too."

We flailed weakly at each other before giving up the pretense and stepping apart.

"You, Tiara, and I all understand the reality of the situation," Arthur said, averting his eyes.

Most of the time, Arthur probably forgot about these sorts of systems, but we all knew they were a fact of life in Freesia. Someone like Pride normally wouldn't associate with someone like Arthur, but she spoke with him nearly every day now. Clearly the social hierarchy didn't sit well with him, though. Perhaps he feared they would grow distant, or he already felt lonely.

I knew the other knights had been talking about Pride's looming engagement. Even Pride wouldn't get to learn her fiancé's identity until the day of the party. The man destined to become the next prince consort of Freesia was a total mystery. But plenty of people had been speculating, including Arthur's comrades. Her fiancé was likely to be a foreign prince, a great man who was worthy to stand at her side.

There was no containing the rumors, even among the knights. Captain Alan of the First Squadron just hung his head. The newly appointed Vice Captain Eric merely looked sad. And Captain Callum of the Third Squadron cast his gaze aside, uncharacteristically melancholy any time the topic came up. I knew the knights all loved Pride. This choice would affect them too. Even Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark struggled with the impending news and the blow to the knights' morale. I once overheard Vice Commander Clark trying to console Arthur, who merely replied, "Well, it's not like she's leavin' the kingdom or something, right?"

True enough. As the crown princess, Pride would not be married off to another land. Her fiancé would simply come to live at the castle, and Arthur's proximity to Pride would remain unchanged. But judging by his sour expression, that was little comfort.

“We already knew this was coming,” I said. “Elder Sister is getting engaged. As the future seneschal, I’m prepared to support her fiancé for her sake.”

I swung my sword idly at my side. Arthur watched me with an expression that said he empathized with my feelings.

“However, that’s only if I decide Pride’s fiancé is a suitable man.”

I plunged the blade into the ground with a *thunk*. I’d never called her simply “Pride” outside of her presence, but I was too angry for pleasantries today. Arthur shot me a worried look. There was no stuffing this down, though. A long-dormant rage seized my chest, pouring out all at once. My clenched hands trembled, causing my half-sunk sword to quiver in the earth. Arthur recoiled from my intensity.

“Hey now, Stale...” Arthur began, but I ignored him.

“I decided to look into Pride’s...Elder Sister’s fiancé for myself.” My voice came out as a growl.

“What?!” Arthur cried.

Before the official announcement, no one was supposed to know her fiancé’s identity besides the queen, the prince consort, and the seneschal. Not even Prime Minister Gilbert knew. But I had the power of teleportation and, despite the risk of severe punishment, I had to know who this mystery man was. I’d eavesdropped on several conversations between high-ranking government officials to learn whatever I could.

“Her fiancé is the firstborn prince of our allied country, the kingdom of Anemone. There are three Anemonian princes in total, but the kingdom selects its successor by designation of the king, and this particular prince is famous for his excellence. Rumor had it he’d become the next king, regardless of his title, but now he’s going to be Big Sister’s fiancé.”

Arthur gaped at me, wide-eyed and slack-jawed at my audacity, but all he managed to say was “Then there’s no problem with him, right?”

He was an outstanding prince, worthy of becoming his nation’s king. That made him perfect for Pride, the future Freesian queen.

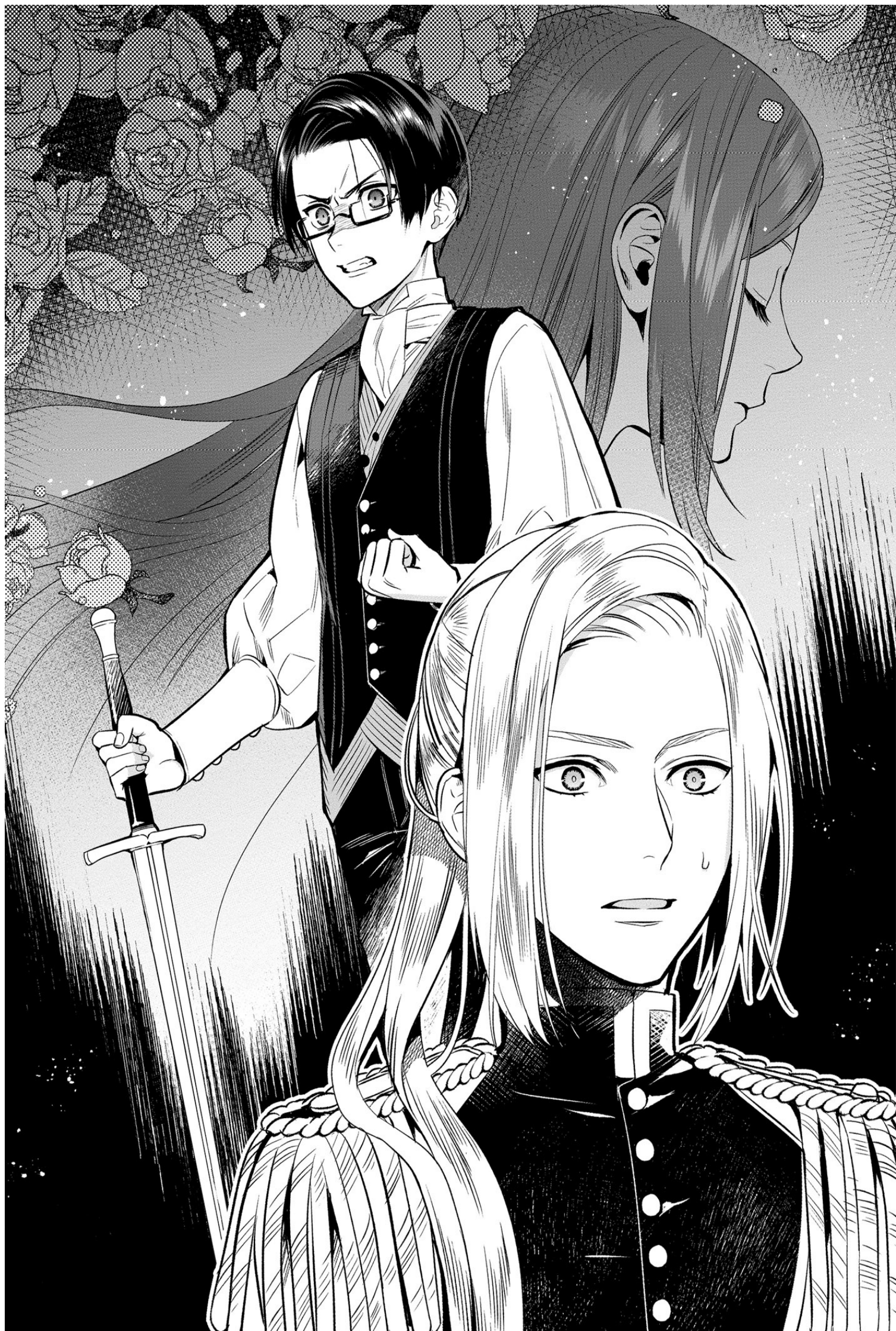
“Right,” I replied. “He’s seventeen, so he’s close to Elder Sister in age. He’s also a handsome man. I’ve never met him myself, but for *certain reasons* his beauty is quite famous. It’s said that every single person in the kingdom of Anemone knows of his good looks.”

Arthur gripped his sword and waited for me to continue, looking nervous.

“I used Gilbert to gather information about Anemone,” I revealed.

Arthur’s mouth fell open even wider. I was sure he was shocked that I’d go to Gilbert of all people. But surely I would shock him further.

“That prince from the rumors is said to be a famous playboy and philanderer.”



Clang! Arthur's sword slipped from his hands.

"He's said to have twenty girls of his own in the local village and five unofficial concubines within the castle walls. He'll flirt with any woman he lays eyes on, which is why he was never brought to our allied discussions or ceremonies," I went on, fueled by rage. "Gilbert cautioned me that this is all just hearsay but, at the very least, it's true that the prince was making frequent visits to the local village."

My sword, still stuck in the ground, began to rattle loudly.

"Prince Leon Adonis Coronaria, the famous Anemonian playboy, is my elder sister's fiancé!"

Crick!

Neither of us knew where this new sound came from. Perhaps my sword had cracked. Or maybe one of our blood vessels had finally burst.

Happy sixteenth birthday, Princess Pride."

"Your Highness, I very much enjoyed your speech. Our kingdom will have no regrets in supporting your joint policy endeavors to the fullest."

"Princess Pride, might I hear more about this 'school system'?"

The formal celebration of my sixteenth birthday was one of the most lavish ceremonies I'd witnessed in the castle banquet hall. Guests filled the massive room. I'd just finished all my official announcements on joint policy and the school system and was trying to catch my breath at last. Easier said than done with a swarm of well-wishers coming to greet me.

"Elder Sister."

Stale held a glass out for me with a kind smile. I thanked him and accepted the much-needed drink. Tiara, at his side, cried out, "Big Sister! You were wonderful out there!" But it was Tiara, as cute as cotton candy, who really shone. I appreciated her praise nonetheless and stroked her hair despite being in front of strangers.

"Your dress looks beautiful on you as well. Don't you think, Big Brother?" Tiara asked shyly.

Placing his hand on the black frames of his glasses, Stale quietly agreed with a “Y-yes.” Their praise always made me so happy, even if they were just being polite.

I was sixteen now, old enough to be treated as an adult, so for today’s event I wore a dress that showed a bit more skin than usual. My neutral expression could be a bit stern and scary, so mature dress styles actually suited me better than the cute kind. Still, today’s dress took it slightly further. It was more than just a mature style—it was a dress meant for an adult woman. The material was a deep wine red, much like the color of my hair. The chest area lay more open, a far more alluring cut than what I usually wore.

It felt strange wearing a dress like this with my slim figure. At the start of the game, Pride was already a last boss queen with a voluptuous figure. I prayed that someday I might reach that level.

I didn’t realize I was staring down at myself while musing over all this until Stale muttered, “Something less revealing might be preferable...” Red tinged his cheeks. Maybe seeing his sister in a dress meant for adults embarrassed him. I should have had a tailor tone down or add some padding to the chest area.

“Princess Pride.”

I turned at Commander Roderick’s call. Vice Commander Clark, Captain Callum, and my imperial knight, Arthur, stood with him.

“I’d like to wish you a very happy birthday, Your Highness. I expect great things from the school system you introduced to us earlier. I’m sure it will have an impact on the lives of the people. You’ve truly grown up to be an incredible princess.”

Captain Roderick smiled, as handsome as ever. The commander of the knights had close-cropped silver hair and deep-blue eyes, features echoed in his son Arthur. He’d called me “incredible.” Something about hearing that from the commander carried a different weight than it would coming from most. I thanked him even as a bashful smile spread across my face.

I reached out to shake his hand, only for Commander Roderick to gently take it in his own hand and kiss it. It was proof that the commander now saw me as a woman, which I was pleased to learn, even though it made my cheeks heat up.

This was nothing like the incident five years ago when Commander Roderick burst into laughter at the sight of my exposed legs.

Vice Commander Clark came to greet me next, offering the same chaste kiss as the commander. The vice commander wore one layer of his blond hair tied up in the back and bore visible scars—his badges of honor as a knight. No matter how many years passed, he still had a gentle smile that always reminded me of the kind of young man who might work at a flower shop. But that memory from five years ago was still embarrassing enough to make my cheeks flush all over again.

“Happy birthday, Princess Pride. The entire order offers you our sincerest congratulations.” Vice Commander Clark continued in a whisper, “Your birth in this world was the greatest of blessings.”

At this, the warmth spread not just to my face, but throughout my entire body. My brain screamed with embarrassment as I tried to accept such kind words.

Commander Roderick nudged the vice commander, smiled at me, and said, “He really means that.” He was so charming that I couldn’t help but second-guess my memory and wonder if he really *was* a love interest in the game. *Wait... Love interest?*

“Happy birthday, Your Highness. My name is Callum Bordeaux.”

Captain Callum approached next, jolting me out of my daze. The knight had hair with a faint red tint and crimson eyes to match. I remembered him well. We’d met numerous times at various ceremonies, and most of all...

“Thank you, Captain Callum. I know exactly who you are. Ever since the victory banquet, I’ve heard all sorts of stories about you from Arthur.”

I had met Captain Callum many times—at ceremonies, Prime Minister Gilbert’s party, and the victory banquet after the successful mission to eliminate a human trafficking organization. For some reason, the captain still felt the need to introduce himself to me at every public event. Thinking him to be a very polite man, I reached out to him for a handshake.

Arthur occasionally shared stories about his fellow knights ever since the day

of that special mission. Among them, I heard many tales of Captain Alan from the First Squadron, the newly appointed Vice Captain Eric, and especially Captain Callum. Though he wasn't Arthur's direct superior, Arthur seemed extremely fond of the man, judging by how often he talked about him in front of me, Stale, and Tiara.

Captain Callum lit up at my recognition and shot a look over at Arthur, whose shoulders flinched. He waved his hands as if to say, *I promise I didn't say anything weird!* The commander and vice commander just shrugged and chuckled.

Forgive me, Arthur!

"Captain Callum, I've learned that you're a very capable knight as well as a kind man who always looks out for his fellow knights and subordinates. I agree with that description," I said.

I have to let him know that Arthur didn't do anything wrong!

I meant to reassure everyone involved, but Captain Callum's face flushed red. To my dismay, I realized how embarrassing it must be to receive such praise from a subordinate. On top of that, Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark bore strange smiles as they and Captain Callum all turned to Arthur. Poor Arthur was the most embarrassed of all as he whipped his beet-red face away from them. I'd only managed to make things worse.

I'm so sorry, Arthur! Really!

Already planning my future apology to Arthur, I tried to focus on Captain Callum, only to find his eyes still looking through me.

"I-I don't deserve such praise..." he sputtered. Clearly, Arthur's regard meant a lot to him. I could sympathize. If my personal maids, Lotte and Mary, talked about me this way, I would feel the same.

I tried to slowly remove my hand from his, but Captain Callum went on in a shrill voice, "Ah... The same goes for Arthur! He is a fine knight as well. Ask anyone and they'll say he's the best choice to serve as your personal knight, Your Highness. Harrison, the captain of the Eighth Squadron in which Arthur serves, also thinks highly of him. Arthur's always a diligent hard worker, and of

course, he's splendid with a sword and in hand-to-hand combat. Lately, he even —"

"C-C-C-Captain Callum! I'm sorry, but that's plenty! I'm really just..." Arthur cut Captain Callum off, his face as red as a tomato. Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark both turned away, physically shaking as they tried to contain their laughter. They must have been happy to see their beloved boy receiving so much love from a superior officer. Though I could imagine the choice words Arthur would have for them later if he caught them laughing.

Finally, I moved on to Arthur.

"Happy birthday...Princess Pride," he said, still blushing. He gripped my hand, casting his eyes aside for some reason. "Y-your dress...is very beautiful. Or rather...*you're* beautiful, Your Highness."

I couldn't help feeling a bit bashful. "Thank you, Arthur, and thank you for your continued support."

Arthur suddenly looked straight at me with wide eyes. I wondered if I'd said something wrong, but he simply told me, "Of course. I will always protect you." He attempted to smile, but sadness shot through it.

What in the world was wrong with everyone? First Tiara and Stale. Now Arthur too? I couldn't sort it out, so I just thanked him and bid the knights goodbye.

When I turned to scan the rest of the room, I caught a glimpse of a handsome young man with dark-blue hair.

"Oh!" I blurted out.

"Is something wrong?" a guest asked, but I couldn't find the words to respond. That boy was...

The blue-haired boy noticed my change in demeanor and met my gaze with wide eyes. It was enough to make my heart want to leap out of my chest.

Hang on a second! Where's the last one? Wait! It's my sixteenth birthday today... That means...

Shocked, I pressed a hand to my chest. *No, if I look up right now, my eyes will*

go straight to him. I worked so hard to get through my announcements and greetings, so I didn't even notice that he was right next to me!

"Everything all right, Elder Sister?" Stale peeled away from his conversation with a guest to rush to my side.

"I'm fine. I just got a bit dizzy for a moment."

I smiled, apologizing to the guests closest to me, and encouraged them to continue their conversations. One was a queen from an allied country. Thankfully, she sympathized with me and suggested I was probably exhausted from all the preparations for this event. I nodded, trying to focus on the people around me. Stale lingered by my side, his palpable concern prickling my skin.

One by one, I greeted new well-wishers as they approached to speak with me. The shock of remembering two love interests at once had nearly knocked me to my knees. I couldn't even maintain a facade of calm. My guests tried to smile, but their hesitation in the face of my strange behavior was clear.

The next guest was a king from a neighboring country, his face a bit pale, but I barely saw him with my mind so preoccupied.

"Are you all right, Princess Pride?"

It was him.

I gulped at the young man before me, the boy with the dark-blue hair. He'd patiently waited his turn in line, and now he was here. Right in front of me.

His glossy hair reached down to his ears. Unlike Arthur's eyes, which were the blue of a clear sky, his eyes were the color of sapphires. With jade eyes and pale-white skin, the boy possessed an androgynous sort of beauty. His impressive height made it hard to believe he was only one year older, and his charming smile captivated me.

This was Leon Adonis Coronaria. In the game, he was Queen Pride's—or, rather, *my* fiancé. He was also a love interest in the first game in the ORL series. Prince Leon lost everything and then Pride...and then I delivered the finishing blow to his heart.

"Princess Pride, would you like to step outside and get some air with me?"

That charming smile overtook me. Helpless to refuse, I agreed to his invitation. I truly couldn't believe I forgot the existence of the fiancé who came as part of the crown princess's sixteenth birthday.

I wanted to hold my head in my hands as we stepped out onto the balcony. Suddenly I understood why Stale, Tiara, and Arthur had those strained looks on their faces. They were likely uneasy about the prospect of a princess who dove so deeply into work that she forgot all about her betrothed. It would have been difficult to point this out without it coming across as criticism, though, so they all bit their tongues this whole time. The matter of my fiancé should have been foremost on my mind—for any normal woman, it would have been. But here I was completely preoccupied by the implementation of the school system.

“Your Highness?”

Prince Leon's voice called me back to the present. When I met his gaze, he offered a dazzling smile. “Still not feeling well, are you?”

Is that why he'd led me out here? Did he think I was ill? I couldn't possibly tell him that *he* was the actual source of my discomfort.

“I'm all right,” I said. “Thank you for your concern.” I managed to smile back at him.

“I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Leon Adonis Coronaria. I am the firstborn prince of Anemone, who is allied to Freesia. We haven't met until now, isn't that right?”

That beautiful face of his bloomed into another smile. I worried about the effect such a look might have on my heart.

I wouldn't expect anything less from the first ORL game's prince of sensuality.

The last remaining love interest had a sweet personality that came through in certain scenes during the game, but when it came to pure and simple eroticism, no one throughout the entire series beat Prince Leon. The game had an all-ages rating, but many scenes between Tiara and Prince Leon were particularly heated. In the latter half of the game, players even got some...intense romantic events. *Well, considering the flow of the game's story...*

“It's an honor to meet you, Prince Leon. I'm Pride Royal Ivy, firstborn princess

of Freesia.”

When I introduced myself, Prince Leon smiled sweetly and reached his hand out. I expected a handshake, only to have the prince take my hand and smoothly press his lips against it. It was the same kiss I’d received from Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark—a gesture of respect—but I didn’t expect it so soon from a boy I’d only just met. My face burned.

“Your Highness, might I say that your beauty is truly unrivaled. It will be an honor to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Wait, wait, wait! Mother hasn’t even announced it yet!

Under the silvery light of the moon, Prince Leon’s whole demeanor changed into something decidedly more sensual. He smiled tenderly, and I froze up on the spot.

What should I do?! He’s like a totally different character than the one from the start of the game! I wasn’t prepared for this!

“Shall we return to the party? It seems as if something’s about to begin,” he said.

He took my hand so he could escort me back inside, but my mind screamed the whole time.

“Something?” We both already know exactly what it’s going to be!

“I shall now introduce the crown princess Pride Royal Ivy’s fiancé.”

At Mother’s signal, I stood in front of my throne and somehow managed to summon a smile for my guests. In truth, I wanted nothing more than to flee the room.

“Prince Leon Adonis Coronaria of the kingdom of Anemone. May his engagement to my dear daughter strengthen the alliance between our two great lands.”

A wave of applause and congratulations crashed over me. Prince Leon emerged from the tumult. I awkwardly feigned surprise, though I probably wasn’t very convincing. Prince Leon took long strides toward me and kissed the

back of my hand once more, telling me, “It’s a great honor.” I managed to keep a cooler head than last time, but I surely didn’t fool anyone.

“My dear Princess Pride, I promise to love you with all of my heart.”

My guests nearly sighed at that pronouncement. The rest of the evening was filled with well-wishing. Every time I looked up, it seemed Prince Leon was flashing that charming, attractive smile at me.

Following this night, Prince Leon would spend three days as a guest in our castle, in accordance with Freesian law, then return to his home kingdom. After one more week, he would return to live at the castle as my fiancé. The next ten days were critical—both for him...and for me.

Critical.

“Ah...AAAAAAHHHHH! Stay back, stay back, stay back, stay back! Don’t come near me!”

A man cowered in fear, his beautiful blue hair covering his face. He scrambled backward on his bed, trying to get as far as he could from the woman entering the room. Eventually, his panicked scramble took him right off the edge of the bed. He hit the floor with a thump, his fine shirt scrunching and wrinkling. He didn’t even heed the fall before crawling further back, his eyes never leaving the woman striding toward him.

“Heh heh. What’s the matter, Leon? Your beloved fiancée has come to visit you. It hurts to see you treat me so coldly.”

Prince Leon... This is from the game. Ah, it’s the first half of his route. That’s right. His heart is already...

With a piercing chuckle, the woman, the queen.../ sneered at the cowering man.

“Tell me. Do you love me?”

“Y-yes, I love you!” Leon hastened to say. “I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you! So... So please...” Prince Leon held his head in his hands, seemingly stricken with grief, as Pride clutched at her sides and cackled.

“Hee hee... Ha ha ha! I love you too, of course,” she said. “But it’s so unfortunate that you’re still merely my ‘fiancé.’ Did you know? My subjects aren’t very fond of you. They think you have nothing but your reputation to boast of.”

She placed her hands on Prince Leon’s trembling shoulders. He flinched away from her touch with a hoarse shriek.

“It’s not all bad. Gilbert, my prime minister, is working hard to carry out the duties of the prince consort, even without you around.”

Pride’s crimson waves of hair fell over her shoulders and cascaded around Prince Leon as she whispered into his ear.

“But I know all about you. The late king of Anemone ordered you to never return home, didn’t he? Poor little prince. I wonder what would happen if I put an end to our engagement? Would you have anywhere else to go? Heh heh heh.”

She leaned back to pin Prince Leon in place with her piercing gaze. With the curtains drawn in the dark room, her eyes were eerily bright.

“I-I-I...” The prince stuttered, his eyes wild and half-crazed. Pride just sneered down at him.

“Oh, that reminds me,” she said. “My little sister has been paying you visits here lately, hasn’t she? I understand she brings you food and clothes like she’s some sort of maid.”

Prince Leon jerked his head up. His eyes, fixed on Pride, clouded with terror. The blood drained from his face, leaving his skin pale blue, reminiscent of his hair. He choked on half-formed pleas.

“You two are certainly friendly, aren’t you?”

The corners of her mouth pulled into an unnerving grin. Prince Leon shuddered with dread and dug his fingers into his knees hard enough to leave scratch marks. He took shallow breaths, just on the verge of hyperventilation, as all the blood drained from his face.

“You wouldn’t want me to get ‘jealous’ again, would you?” Pride said.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHH!”

An ear-piercing scream echoed through the room. The prince, in the grips of madness, sobbed and stammered. “It’s not like that... She doesn’t mean anything to me... I don’t want anyone else... You’re the only one for me.” Anything that might appease Pride.

But the sight of the hysterical prince only made Pride cackle shrilly. “Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!” she howled, more mad beast than lady. “Ha ha... Ah ha ha ha! Ahh, that’s perfect. I love that look more than anything.”

Tears formed in her eyes as she laughed on and on. She swiped at them before running her fingers through the screaming prince’s hair.

“Don’t you worry. I would never abandon such an adorable toy. Even if you cheat again, I’ll forgive you as many times as I have to.”

Pride smiled as the prince cradled his head, trembling beneath her as he sank all the way down to the floor.

Prince Leon had been terrified, wounded, and toyed with. Tiara, his only source of comfort, was now being used as a threat against him.

He needs someone to be there with him. Please, don’t hurt him anymore. This man has a pure, compassionate heart. He doesn’t deserve to be locked in a room and left to rot away in a state of terror.

Somebody, please, take his hand. Tell him that he’s wrong. It isn’t Pride.

The one his heart truly loves is...

“Pride. Are you feeling all right?”

“Oh, Prince Leon. Yes, thank you for your help. What about you?”

It was the morning after my birthday party and Prince Leon had come to visit me. To be honest, I wasn’t feeling “all right” at all. I had some kind of nightmare and failed to get a good night’s sleep. I woke up crying and tearing at my sheets. Maybe it was a culmination of all my recent stress. At the very least, a visit from Stale, Tiara, and now Prince Leon would serve as a nice distraction.

Tiara and Stale already met Prince Leon after last night's engagement announcement. Tiara was bubbly as she introduced herself to the prince. The scene of those two standing there shaking hands could have been crafted by an artist. Stale was also perfectly friendly for his own introduction...at least on the surface.

Last night, Prince Leon asked me to drop the formalities and titles when speaking to him, since we'd be married in the near future. I agreed on the condition that he do the same for me. He didn't hesitate in calling me simply "Pride" right away. Prince Leon was the first person outside of my family to address me in such a manner, which honestly felt pretty nice. However...

"Pride, I feel truly blessed to be able to start my day by seeing my beloved."

He said these kinds of things all the time and it was deeply embarrassing. Plus, when he spoke this way, a dark aura of bloodlust emanated from Stale. Maybe he thought it was a bit much in public. Tiara, on the other hand, blushed and smirked.

Prince Leon wasn't any better about it in private either. Last night, he'd escorted me back to my room. Before he left, he leaned in and whispered in my ear, "I hope we meet again in your dreams." Between that and the scent of his cologne, my face turned so red that Lotte and Mary worried I had a fever.

Leon Adonis Coronaria.

The man had more than just an alluring smile and a beautiful face—he was a wonderful prince who possessed the skills and disposition to become an excellent ruler. This might make it seem like he should have stayed in his own kingdom and inherited the throne there, but, well...

To put it simply, he had been banished.

Prince Leon became famous in his homeland as a playboy and philanderer, and thus his prospects of becoming the next king diminished. This was why he had to marry into Freesia, where the rumors had yet to reach. Respect and honor were a big deal in Anemone; a royal who violated those ideals could end up exiled or enslaved. They definitely weren't just going to overlook the prince's reputation. In the game, this forced him into an engagement with the evil and wicked Queen Pride.

Unfortunately, that engagement would prove almost as bad as the alternative for Prince Leon. Pride wounded his heart in horrifying ways, warping and corrupting him until he grew fearful of any human interaction. Pride also never really married him, leaving him in limbo as her perpetual fiancé, prince consort in name only.

Prince Leon had no power to defy Pride, but Tiara was there to heal his heart. The poor prince was so broken that he relied on Tiara for everything and even came to love her, depending on her like a typical yandere character. In the latter half of his ORL route, he constantly professed his love and begged Tiara not to leave him:

“As long as I love you, that’s all I need.”

“No, no, please don’t leave me! If I lose you too, I’ll...I’ll...!”

“I love you... I love you... Please, don’t go...”

That sort of thing.

He even once spent an entire night with Tiara in his arms, stealing the occasional kiss from her and nibbling her neck. His route was chock-full of scenes that made me blush just to remember them.

Despite it all, Tiara accepted the yandere prince for who he was. The two strolled through the garden together to admire the flowers and sometimes escaped to the local village, where they cooked and shopped. It was like watching someone go through rehab, the way Tiara took care of him. Naturally, there was no romance between Pride and Leon whatsoever throughout the game.

“Pride, would you feel up to giving me a tour of the gardens?” Prince Leon asked me. “No doubt the trees and flowers will be even more beautiful with you at my side. It will be a memory I can truly treasure.”

Even after lunch, Prince Leon’s flirtations never let up.

I couldn’t imagine how Pride could treat the prince so cruelly if she was on the receiving end of such constant flattery. But then, maybe this sort of stuff was exactly why she treated him so poorly.

“I’d love to,” I said.

After bidding farewell to Stale and Tiara, I led Prince Leon down to the gardens. I would have loved to keep my siblings by my side, but Stale had Arthur and Prime Minister Gilbert in his life, while Tiara had Val, Sefekh, and Khemet. I was at the point in life where I couldn’t monopolize their attention anymore.

Once I’d waved goodbye to them, Prince Leon gently took my hand in his. The gesture came effortlessly—fittingly smooth for a real-life prince.

We walked through the gardens together hand in hand. Prince Leon appeared to take great interest in all the flowers and trees, many of which didn’t exist in his kingdom. Thanks to the ORL Pride’s boss-tier knowledge on the subject, I could give him explanations about each and every plant we saw along our path. He listened carefully the entire time, his blue hair a lovely contrast to all the green around us as he swiveled to look at whatever plant I indicated.

Prince Leon peppered me with questions whenever he got the chance. “What’s your favorite color? What foods do you enjoy? Which season is your favorite? Tell me about your interests. What are your favorite books? What about your favorite flowers? I want to know every little thing about you.” It was the kind of stuff I’d only heard from otome games in my past life, but now they came from the mouth of a beautiful, seductive prince. Heat crawled up my neck from his rapt attention.

Eventually, we headed for some chairs to rest. As soon as we sat, Prince Leon casually wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. My heart nearly leapt out of my throat when I felt his warm chest against me.

“What say we stay like this for a while?” he said.

My face on fire, I looked up at Prince Leon to see that alluring smile. I struggled to direct my gaze. This could not possibly be happening to me. I was reincarnated here as the evil final boss, not the heroine, but this scene was straight out of the heroine’s handbook.

“I love you more than anyone or anything in this world,” Prince Leon whispered in my ear.

I squeezed my eyes shut, cheeks ablaze. How was I supposed to respond to that? Rather than bite my lip, I gritted my teeth, leaning my weight against him and trying to act drowsy instead of mortified.

This is bad. I can't let these things get me so flustered.

That made sense in my head, but when Prince Leon whispered sweet nothings, my heart thrummed wildly in my chest. In my previous life, I had a boring love life at best. Even in this world, I had no romantic entanglements. Neither of my lives had prepared me for this moment.

I needed to calm down. I needed to keep a cool head and accept this kind of flattery; it was only going to get worse in the future. We had to learn to trust each other before he went home, but it was hard when I kept getting flustered by words I knew were all lies. I couldn't let myself feel charmed and overwhelmed by the prince.

Easier said than done, but I did my best for the rest of the day. Then, after dinner, Prince Leon invited me to gaze at the stars with him in his room.

I was prepared to accept the offer, but Stale interjected first. "My apologies, Prince Leon, but Tiara wishes to spend the evening with her sister tonight." When I met Tiara's eyes, she offered an apologetic look trembling with unspent tears.

"In that case, perhaps we can spend tomorrow night together, before I leave for home in the morning," Prince Leon said smoothly.

"Of course. I'd love to."

He broke into that winning smile of his and gracefully took his leave. The moment Prince Leon turned his back, Stale's expression darkened. Maybe he was upset about the change to my plans. Tiara gripped my hand. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"It's all right. I'll stay with you until you fall asleep, Tiara."

Stale and I joined her in her bedroom. The three of us usually gathered in my room, so this was our first time visiting hers in a few years. One wall lay hidden behind dozens of pinned-up book pages. There were picture book illustrations and pages from her favorite stories. It made me cringe a little to know those

books had gone to waste, but this had always been a habit of hers. During the course of the game, when she lived in the isolated tower, Tiara hung up pages from books to decorate the dreary walls.

Her current habits probably stemmed from her backstory within the game. When she was young and in poor health, she also liked to occupy her time by reading everything from reference books to fiction. It meant she had an almost encyclopedic knowledge.

Of course, reading wasn't her only interest. Her room also had things like jewelry boxes and hand mirrors with delicate decorations, all the things a typical young girl would like.

The moment we entered her room, Stale and Tiara whirled on me, firing off questions about Prince Leon. "What have you two been talking about?" "What's he like?" "What do you think of him?" I couldn't tell if they were simply excited to hear some gossip or curious for their own reasons. They were the right ages to start having romantic interests, so my situation probably intrigued them.

I offered what information I could until Tiara drifted off to sleep. Then Stale and I stole quietly out of the room to let her rest. The moment we entered the hall, Stale opened his mouth as though to speak, but then just shook his head. When I pressed, he insisted it was nothing. I had no choice but to bid him good night so we could head to our respective rooms, but something about his demeanor left a knot in my stomach.

I didn't have the energy to worry about it. I was so exhausted that, the moment I entered my room, I greeted Lotte and Mary and collapsed into bed. Yet as I lay there, my thoughts kept churning. I began to worry I wouldn't be able to fall asleep.

A knock sounded somewhere in my bedroom.

I whipped my head around. The noise came from my window...but that didn't make sense. My room was on an upper floor and there was no balcony on the outside.

Knock knock knock!

The sound returned. When I looked more closely, I saw someone outlined by the moonlight. I slipped out of bed and threw on more appropriate clothing before flinging open the curtains. I had my suspicions about who waited beyond the window, but even so, my breath caught in my throat when I actually made out the figure. Or rather, figures.

“Val?! And Sefekh and Khemet! What are you doing here?!”

I threw open the window for the trio. They served as my “delivery people,” transporting mail to and from other countries.

Val, with his dark hair and brown skin, was but a silhouette with the moonlight shining behind him. Eight-year-old Khemet, with his messy black hair, sat on his shoulders. Twelve-year-old Sefekh, with her long pretty hair, stood at his side. They had lighter skin than Val and, where Val often wore an intimidating glare, Sefekh’s face was far gentler—not that someone with a final-boss face was one to judge. She had no bangs, which showed off her sharp-cornered eyes. Combined, the trio served to make Val look even taller.

“Howdy, Mistress. Wow, get a look at ya,” Val said.

He smirked and I quickly hugged my arms around my thin nightgown. Sefekh and Khemet cried out that I looked “cute,” but I dearly wished for more appropriate clothing in that moment. A flush spread across my cheeks.

Val chuckled and said, “Well, ya don’t fill it out too well yet.” I glared at him, yearning to smack him for that particular remark.

“How did you get here?” I said. “There are guards all over patrolling the exterior.”

“When you’re an important guy like me, they don’t hesitate to let you into the castle as soon as they catch a glimpse of you,” Val said. “Well, as long as I tell ’em I’ve got a special delivery for Little Miss Princess. I just so happened to spot ya through your window.”

All I could do was sigh. I would have asked *why* he was here, but I realized I was much more curious about *how* he’d managed it. With the three of them perched on the window ledge, I figured they had to have ropes or something but, when I looked past them, I couldn’t see anything that would have helped

them climb.

As though to demonstrate, Val grinned and gave the castle wall a little kick. The perfectly vertical wall jutted out to form a step, as if a set of stairs had been sculpted into the castle all along.

Ah. Of course. This was Val's special power. He could sculpt dirt walls, so as long as the material was made of earth, he could control it however he wished—and the castle walls were made of clay.

Sure, the guards had let them through, but this little display really highlighted how powerful Val could be when working with Khemet, who amplified others' abilities. Val would make a terrifying assassin for much the same reason Stale would: they both had abilities that made them frightening opponents. But at least Val had entered a fealty contract with me, meaning he couldn't commit any crimes whatsoever. If I gave him an order, he had to obey. It served as a little insurance when dealing with a man who once worked in the criminal underworld.

"Well? You wanna keep chattin' here at the window?" Val prodded. "If any of your guards spot me and rumors start spreadin' that I came here for a little nighttime fun, I don't think that engagement of yours will last very long."

"If you've thought that far ahead, then just come in already!" I snapped, my drowsiness and agitation reaching a fever pitch.

I reached out, grabbed Val's arm, and yanked him into the room before shutting the curtains behind him. Khemet hopped down from Val's shoulders and stood beside Sefekh, both gawking at my room with their mouths hanging open.

"Well? How did your delivery go?" I asked, arms crossed over my chest.

I wished I could just get my mail from him and send them all home. Val snickered and dug an envelope out of his breast pocket.

"It's a letter from the kingdom of Yaburan," he said. "They sent congratulations for your engagement along with it. There were a bunch of presents too, but I didn't wanna haul 'em all over here, so I'll bring 'em around once all the excitement's calmed down."

I accepted the letter from his extended brown fingers, opening it as he explained. The message was nothing too urgent, but Yaburan probably wanted this letter sent swiftly so as not to seem rude. Unlike Val, who apparently had no problem barging into my room late at night.

“Well, Mistress? Tell me about Mister Fiancé.”

Val made himself right at home, taking a seat with the same smirk on his face as he watched my expression. He was the last person I expected to have poking into my love life, especially right after Stale and Tiara.

“He’s a very wonderful person,” I told Val. “The firstborn prince of the kingdom of Anemone. Both last night and today, he treated me quite well.”

Even if he was lying the entire time.

Knowing his backstory from the game, I feared his past would rear its ugly head soon. I pushed the thought aside and squinted at the letter in my hands, trying to read despite the faint light.

“If he’s so great, why do you look pissed?” Val asked.

I snorted and lifted my eyes from the letter. Val’s smile was sharp as a knife. He was actually enjoying my discomfort.

“If you don’t like him, want me to steal you away from here?” Val said.

It felt like he was testing me. “Huh?”

Before I could ask what that even meant, Val rose and closed the distance between us to stand right before me.

“I could do it if you ordered me to, Mistress. Snatch you away from this castle, or help you escape the country. It would be so easy.” His fingertips softly grazed my hair. “We signed a fealty contract, after all.”

His light touch and smooth voice carried an allure wholly unlike Prince Leon’s.

“Livin’ on the run’s not so bad,” he went on. “You can still eat good food, so long as you’ve got money. The whole world is just ripe for the taking. Even if I quit my delivery job, I’ve got a special power that can put food on the table for three brats.”

His fingers trailed down from my hair to trace along my cheek. Despite his brash words, he stroked my skin so tenderly that goosebumps rose everywhere he touched. His eyes remained fixed only on my face. Out of reflex, I...

“Heh... Hee hee... Ha ha ha!”

The laughter bubbled out of me. I never imagined Val would actually worry about me. I must have looked deeply exhausted. It made sense for Tiara and Stale to be concerned, but this was on a different level.

Val jerked his hand back, seemingly startled by my sudden laughter. “What’s so funny?” he asked with a pout.

“It’s nothing,” I said, keeping my hand over my mouth to stifle the giggles. “For a moment there, I actually felt like running away with you three. It sounded like it might be a nice life.”

Val’s eyes went wide. Apparently, he never expected me to take him seriously.

I wasn’t lying, though. His offer truly tempted me. If I, the wicked queen of this world, escaped the castle with Val, then Tiara would become the next queen. Arthur, Stale, Prince Leon, and even the one remaining love interest character—they would all live nice, peaceful lives. I wouldn’t have to intervene to prevent the events I knew were coming. I wouldn’t have to worry about being an evil final boss. Tiara could live a happy life with any of the boys.

I also really liked Val, Sefekh, and Khemet. With my last boss cheats, the four of us could live a fun life in this world as adventurers. Back when I’d regained my past life memories for the first time, I probably would have jumped at the opportunity. But now...now I just couldn’t go with him.

The love I felt for my kingdom had grown far too deep.

I was an obstructing, wicked last boss queen, but I loved this kingdom and its people. I wanted to fight for them for as long as I had left. That meant staying here and serving as this kingdom’s princess until the bitter end.

“Thank you, Val,” I said. “But I still have more work left to do here.”

His eyes were as wide as saucers as he watched me. This time, I was the one

who reached out to touch him. I stood on my tiptoes to stroke that dark brown hair of his. The wind had tousled his hair, leaving it stiff and spiky when I ran my fingers through it.

“But someday,” I added, “if I really do have nowhere else to go...I’ll take you up on that offer. I hope you’ll accept me if the time comes.”

Val wasn’t a love interest in the game. That meant he was the only one I could fully rely on, the only one with no ulterior motive.

I went to lower my hand, but he reached out and caressed it, his skin chilly from the nighttime breeze.

“Whaddya mean, you hope? Say it, Mistress: ‘Take me with you.’ Just give me that order.”

Val took my hand in his—gently, carefully. He didn’t force the touch; that would be a violation of his contract. Instead, he approached me little by little, as if waiting for my approval with each advance. I couldn’t look away from his weighty gaze. I stood there, rooted to the spot.

He asked me to order him. The fealty contract would ensure he couldn’t disobey such a command; he knew that better than anyone. He must have really wanted me to say it.

Val had once despised me so intensely, but now he wanted to support me. Warmth spread through my chest, and I squeezed his hand with a smile. Filled with gratitude, I voiced my demand.

“I order you,” I said. “If that time comes, and you agree to it, please take me away with you.”

Eventually, I would be a villain in this kingdom, but if Val would let me accompany him on his travels, perhaps my life wouldn’t be so bad.



Val just stared at me, letting my words sink in. Then he sighed and released my hand.

“Let’s go,” he told Khemet and Sefekh, who were busy taking in the sight of my bedroom. They rushed right to Val’s side.

Val turned away from me and stepped up onto the windowsill. I called his name, and he stopped, casting a sidelong glance at me over his shoulder. Sefekh and Khemet clung to his hands.

“Thank you so much,” I said. “I’m so glad to have you.”

For just a moment, his eyes filled with shock. Khemet and Sefekh silently stared at his frozen face. Was Val angered by my words? Perhaps he rejected gratitude from the very person who’d forced him into a fealty contract, but my feelings were genuine. I was glad he was in my life. I was glad he was here tonight. Otherwise, I probably would have tossed and turned, churning over my worries all night only to wake up to more the next day. It was Val who’d made me feel better about everything tonight.

Suddenly, Val reached for me, but he stopped just short of touching me. He scowled at his own hand, as though annoyed that it wouldn’t obey him, then placed his hand on top of my head instead. Unlike his more intimate attempt to stroke my cheek, he now ruffled my hair like he was placating a child.

“Whatever you wish, Mistress. I promised you, right? You can ask me to do whatever you feel like, so think about yourself more, just like I do.”

Val chuckled, his soft expression giving way to his more customary, sinister look.

“If you ever really feel like ditchin’ everything in your life to run away with us...”

He paused there, took his hand away from my head, and stepped out of the windowsill, still facing me. He gripped Sefekh and Khemet’s hands and gave me one last smirk.

“I’ll dedicate my whole life to the three of ya.”

With those parting words, he disappeared from the window with the children

in tow.

It all happened in an instant. Startled, I rushed to the window and peered down. They descended the castle wall like they were riding an elevator. The walls then slid right back into place as the trio disappeared into the depths of the night. The last I saw of them, they were all staring up at me.

I watched the place where they'd been for a moment before closing my window and pulling the curtains shut. Instead of going straight to bed, I lingered, watching the faint light of the moon where it glowed against the fabric.

Everything was going to be all right. I had my past-life memories, and that meant there were still positive things I could do for this kingdom and for Prince Leon. I was the only person who could ensure that Prince Leon was happy.

Filled with a newfound resolution, I closed my eyes, certain I would sleep well this night.

"Stale, Prince Leon would like me to give him a tour of the village after lunch this afternoon. Will you please inform Arthur during your practice today?" Pride asked me.

"Of course," I said. "He's your dear fiancé. And it goes without saying that I'll accompany you too, as your steward."

It was nice seeing a genuine smile on Pride's face as she thanked me. She seemed in better spirits than the previous day. Soon, a maid came in and announced that Prince Leon was waiting for her, so she had to leave.

It had been three days since Prince Leon came to this castle as Pride's fiancé. After today, he would return to his homeland of Anemone, albeit only for a short time. Then we'd prepare for him to return in one week to live permanently at the castle as the next prince consort.

Pride, Prince Leon, Arthur, and I boarded a carriage after lunch. I wanted to take Tiara with us, but officially, this was supposed to be a relaxing trip between Pride and her fiancé. I joined them as Pride's steward, and Arthur came as her imperial knight, but Tiara had no reason to tag along. All she could do was wave

as we left. My chest ached seeing the sadness in her eyes.

“Pride, the simple act of sharing a carriage with you is enough to send me into bliss,” Prince Leon said.

As the carriage drove on, Prince Leon pulled Pride closer to him to whisper sweet nothings in her ear. Each time, Pride smiled peacefully, seeming much calmer than the day before. She looked more mature somehow, but that also made her feel more distant. I could see the same thought darkening Arthur’s expression. She wasn’t our Pride anymore; she was slipping away.

Pride had introduced Arthur to Prince Leon before we boarded the carriage, and that was when the glowering started. He kept his eyes glued to the ground after their meeting, looking openly gloomy. Even now, Arthur only occasionally stole a glance at Pride and her fiancé, his eyes unusually piercing and intense.

Prince Leon asked about the locations we visited in the village. We traveled to markets, plazas, major streets, taverns where the residents gathered to relax, hills, outskirt forests—every nook and cranny of the territory.

Every time Pride and I explained a destination, the prince listened eagerly, peppering us with questions. He seemed especially interested in how the citizens here lived and the nature of our kingdom. He even leapt out of the carriage at times to interact directly with them. At first, I worried he was just trying to flirt, but he shook hands with everyone he met—men and women, young and old—and listened intently as they spoke.

“Prince Leon, do you find that the Freesian people differ from Anemonians?” I asked as we continued down the road.

He smiled before telling me about the citizens of his kingdom. He seemed well-versed in Anemonian culture and fads among all the different social classes. I had to admit, I was impressed by his observations and his ability to see things from the public’s point of view, as well as his thoughts on the future of our two nations.

“You really love your people, don’t you?” I had to yield in the face of his deep knowledge.

“I love the Freesian people too,” he replied with a smile, casually slipping

Pride's hand into his. He turned and they shared a smile from a hair's breadth apart. She squeezed his hand, voicing a quiet "Thank you."

Whether I wanted to or not, I had to confess that what sat before me was a couple who suited each other incredibly well. These two people, who both loved their subjects deeply, would become the queen and prince consort. There was little doubt the kingdom they ruled would flourish. As we returned home in the bumpy carriage, I readied my final question—the one I'd been holding close to my chest this whole day.

"Prince Leon," I ventured, "I've heard that you enjoy making trips to local villages in your homeland as well."

If the rumors were true and the reasons for those trips were something shameful to the prince, he would probably give some kind of excuse or denial. I kept my eyes fixed on his as I awaited his response. But he wasn't rattled at all.

With the same charming smile as ever, he pulled Pride close.

"I do," he replied. "To learn how my people live, I must travel there in person, inquire for myself, and touch them with my own two hands. I believe that to be more important than anything else for a leader. It's much better than governing only on paper."

It was a splendid answer. He was right—there was nothing improper about traveling to the village in person. It was proof, if anything, of the deep love he felt for his citizens. The more I learned of the prince, the more I saw a man of outstanding character.

"That's a wonderful way of seeing it," I said with a smile, only to receive yet another perfect retort.

"You're just as wonderful, Prince Stale. I'd heard rumors of your impressive wisdom at such a young age, but they didn't do you justice. I know how relieved Pride will feel to have you as her seneschal. As will I, of course."

That was it. The rumors really *were* nothing more than rumors.

This man was a wonderful prince. He was intelligent, he cared about his people, and he showed no signs of arrogance. He loved Pride too. Prince Leon was a perfect fiancé for her. At first, I would have preferred she marry someone

like Arthur or another knight over a guy like this prince. I even considered finding a way to swap Prince Leon out for Arthur—but no longer. Prince Leon was a great match and a far better option than some other eligible candidates like Gilbert or Val.

No, I couldn't fault him. I had a duty to congratulate and support this union.

My whole chest tightened, and I clenched my jaw around a sudden wave of pain. This was important for Pride's happiness, as well. She would be a great queen with someone like Prince Leon by her side.

I searched for Arthur, wondering if he was having as hard a time as me. He tended to hold back in front of members of the royal family, so he'd remained quiet for most of the carriage ride. But he was my friend and a close companion of Pride and Tiara. I valued his opinion, even if he was too serious with his adherence to procedure to voice it in front of the prince. Instead, he sat with his head drooping. I couldn't get a look at his expression, but I didn't want to call him out and place him in an awkward position.

Arthur never looked up again until we reached the castle. Once we arrived, I realized his hands, clenched in his lap and on his sword, were trembling. Arthur rushed to leave the carriage first and held the door open for Pride, Prince Leon, and me, never raising his eyes.

"Prince Leon Adonis Coronaria, the famous Anemonian playboy, is my elder sister's fiancé!"

As disturbed as I'd been, it was wrong of me to say that. Arthur had been wiser than I'd been in reserving his judgment until after meeting the prince. The nasty rumors that I'd shared had probably really upset and unnerved Arthur during that carriage ride. I needed to visit his room tonight to clear up the misunderstanding.

But still...a kernel of worry wriggled into my mind. I was no stranger to hiding my flaws in front of others. Could Prince Leon be just as adept?

Pride seemed to notice Arthur's strange behavior, but she said nothing in front of Prince Leon. Nor did Arthur. As Jack, Pride's imperial guard, came to escort us, Arthur offered nothing but a goodbye to Pride. His face was pale as a ghost's when I caught a brief glimpse of it as he left.

I followed behind Pride and Prince Leon, but when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Arthur sprinting away. *Oh no...* I'd really messed up. Guilt twisted in my gut. I'd given Arthur the wrong idea about Prince Leon and now he was agonized with concern for Pride.

Tiara was there to greet us as soon as we entered the castle. She met us with a smile and told us dinner was almost ready, but sadness lingered in her expression. Pride wrapped Tiara in a hug, but Prince Leon quickly stepped up beside them. Normally Tiara would never be the one to pull away first, but today she did, apparently bashful about interrupting the happy couple.

Worry flickered across Pride's face, but Prince Leon just slipped his arm around Pride's shoulders and kept them moving forward. Tiara came to cling to me instead. I put my arm around her as she clutched my shirt. We followed Pride and Prince Leon, a bond of sadness passing silently between us.

I always knew that this day would come.

But when I watched Pride walking away with the man who was to become her spouse, my heart ached like an open wound.

Am I the only one who feels like this?

Pride, Tiara, and I had always walked side by side, inseparable, but everything had already changed.

After dinner, Prince Leon took Pride's hand and led her away once more. She smiled, following Prince Leon to his bedroom without a beat of hesitation.

The thud of the door closing struck me like a fist. My vision wavering, I hurried away from the dinner table with Tiara in tow. The feelings inside me threatened to overflow. At the very least, I could be there for Tiara, but when I attempted to comfort her, she just forced a smile. She insisted she was fine, then left for her own room.

I returned to my bedroom, prepared to go to bed, and had the maids shut the door on their way out. Once I'd turned out the lights, I let out a long, deep breath. The pitch-black world helped soothe my restless thoughts, at least until I remembered that Pride was submerged in this same darkness—alone with

Prince Leon.

It's okay. Prince Leon is a great person. As her younger brother, all you need to do right now is celebrate the fact that Pride has found a wonderful partner.

I took deep, steadying breaths. Just as I was about to teleport...

TwEEEEEEEEet...

A whistle trilled. It had to be Arthur, but I couldn't fathom why he'd call for me now of all times. He never summoned a member of the royal family lightly. The day's events must have badly rattled him. At the very least, I had to go and apologize.

When I activated my special power, the world blinked away. In an instant, I was inside Arthur's room at the order. He sat backward in his chair with his arms crossed over the top and his head hanging limp.

"Arthur."

He raised his head when he heard me, but it didn't ease the ache in my chest. "Oh, it's Stale," he murmured, his head sinking right back down.

I rushed to explain. "Arthur, Prince Leon isn't—"

"I don't..."

I was about to tell him that the prince wasn't the man from the rumors, as well as apologize for what I'd done, but Arthur spoke up first, his voice clear and definitive. I decided to stay quiet to hear what he had to say.

"I don't want...Princess Pride and Prince Leon to get married."

His voice wavered. I had no clue how to respond, but he went on.

"If she really has to marry someone, I'd rather see her married to you or one of the older knights," Arthur said. "No, Stale, you'd be a million times better for her."

"I don't want your flattery," I told him, as I always did, but Arthur ignored me.

"I know how marriages work within the royal family. Love isn't really a factor. It's more about politics. I get it. That's how it has to work for Her Highness since she's gonna be the next queen."

Arthur's grief spilled out, too great for me to interrupt. I certainly didn't plan to tell him Pride was in Prince Leon's room tonight.

"As long as it's not him," Arthur said. "That Prince Leon guy... He can't make Her Highness happy."

Whether he just couldn't accept reality or he still believed the rumors I'd shared with him, he needed to hear the truth from me directly.

"Arthur, listen to me. I'm sorry. I was wrong. Prince Leon is a respectable—"

"I won't accept that... *I won't!*"

His shoulders shook. I reached out to console him but recoiled from the intensity of his outburst before reaching him.

"As long as it's not that bastard," he spat. "She can't marry him!"

Arthur clutched the back of his chair so hard the wooden frame groaned. He was normally so mild-mannered, but now Arthur's sudden wave of murderous rage was palpable. I knew I wasn't the one he was angry with, but I still couldn't help but stumble backward.

I was about to ask what exactly sent Arthur into such a rage, but he cut me off yet again. When I heard what he had to say next, I ceased to breathe.

"I've never felt such dread from someone's creepy smile," he said.

Finally, Arthur raised his head and locked his gaze on mine. His blue eyes blazed red with fury.

A "creepy smile," huh? Arthur knew better than I did how to see through false expressions. Dread sank deep into the pit of my stomach. Was I wrong about the prince all over again? But that meant...

On the night of her birthday, I saw Princess Pride step outside with a blue-haired prince. He must have been her fiancé, but I only got a look at them from far away. They stood side by side, the very image of a perfect couple.

When the engagement was officially announced, everyone—including me and my dad—congratulated the couple...but I couldn't bring myself to look at them.

Not at the prince or at Princess Pride, who was probably beaming with happiness.

After practice with Stale the next day, Her Highness introduced me to Prince Leon before their trip to the local village. It was the first time I felt something was wrong. As Princess Pride, Prince Leon, Stale, and I all rode in a carriage together to sightsee, that feeling of wrongness only grew stronger.

“Pride, the simple act of sharing a carriage with you is enough to send me into bliss.”

Just glancing at Princess Pride in that state, pulled close as Prince Leon whispered sweet nothings in her ear, was enough to make my heart throb painfully. I couldn’t look at them any longer.

Prince Leon’s plastered-on smile filled me with too much dread.

At first, I thought he only smiled so because the birthday party was such a public event, so it didn’t strike me as odd. Stale was the same way—he always wore a fake smile in formal situations. I figured it wasn’t much different from that.

The next time I saw it was when Her Highness introduced us outside the carriage. I bowed as Prince Leon greeted me with that creepy smile of his. I thought maybe I was just a lowly subordinate not worthy of a real smile—but that changed when we all entered the carriage.

When he put his arm around Princess Pride, took her hand in his, sweet-talked her with words of love, exited the carriage to interact with the villagers, and answered all of Stale’s questions—that smile never dropped. Not once.

It wasn’t like Stale’s forced, polite ones or Prime Minister Gilbert’s, meant to hide things away. Even as Prince Leon crooned to Princess Pride, his smile remained painted on. Every time I saw it, the anger inside me burned hotter. How was he able to keep sweet-talking when he didn’t mean a single word of it?

The whole time, I couldn’t stop replaying the rumors I’d heard from Stale. This prince was a famous playboy in his kingdom. I couldn’t help but believe that as I observed him.

And then there was Princess Pride.

Her Highness always smiled brilliantly and genuinely when she spoke to knights like me, visitors, or people she met in the village, but now she *also* wore a fake smile as she gazed at the prince. I felt like my heart would shatter when I saw her like that; I barely even recognized her. It was almost like, even this early on, she knew not to expect anything real from Prince Leon.

They were nothing like the happy couple I'd taken them for at first. Stale donned his usual false smile in front of the prince. Prince Leon's smile sent chills down my spine. Even Princess Pride was faking it today... My heart plummeted. As a knight, I'd been on many escort missions and attended many ceremonies where everyone feigned their smiles to be polite. I was used to seeing it, used to shrugging it off.

But I couldn't take this. Something was wrong with the way the prince smiled. It made even Princess Pride force herself into an act. The whole charade gnawed at me. My stomach churned with nausea. I wanted to cover my mouth, but I couldn't do something so impolite in front of the royal family, so I clenched my fists instead.

After I saw them off at the castle, I knew I had to get away from there, so I rushed to a spot where I could safely expel the bile gathering in my throat.

Those two can't be together.

Of course, I had no say in this country's politics. I wasn't qualified for something like that. But what if Her Highness really married that prince and spent the rest of her life on the receiving end of those completely empty words of love? What if she had to keep that awful, phony smile on her face at all times? Not just with the prince, but also with Stale, Tiara, her people...even me.

I wouldn't be able to take it.

I wanted her to be happy. It didn't matter if it hurt me. All I asked was that I wouldn't have to see the princess, who cared about her land and her people more than anything else, wearing that fake smile for the rest of her life.

If that heart of hers, the same one that granted me my salvation, were to die, then that would be the end of me too.

Stale was speechless when he heard what I had to say. He remained silent for a long beat. Confusion clouded his eyes. I knew my own face was twisted with disgust and anger, my blood running hot.

“In other words,” Stale began, finally getting his thoughts in order, “Elder Sister and Prince Leon both had fake smiles on their faces almost the entire time?”

“Right. That’s how it looked to me, at least.”

I wished I’d just gotten the whole thing wrong. As soon as those words came out of my mouth, Stale whispered, “Pride...” He was still confused.

He raked his fingers through his hair. “But why? What reason would Prince Leon have, much less Elder Sister? Do they just want to get through the marriage quickly for the sake of their kingdoms? No... Then why? She didn’t say anything bad about Prince Leon last night. She didn’t seem to know of the rumors either and, as far as I saw, he only ever acted as if he was very fond of her. So why wouldn’t she be able to give him a real smile?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe she sees his true nature, or maybe she doesn’t wanna get married in the first place. Or maybe Prince Leon is holding some sort of information over her head.”

As I uttered that final suspicion, I squeezed the beleaguered chair hard. Stale’s jaw jerked as he audibly ground his teeth. Neither of us would forgive that prince if he intentionally stole Princess Pride’s true smile away.

“Big Sister’s the kind of person who would bear anything for the sake of the kingdom,” Stale said. “Even if she had a reason to not go through with the marriage, she probably wouldn’t try to call it off. Plus, it’s not like we know his entire personality is fake yet.”

I agreed, to a degree, even as my stomach burned. I understood that the most important aspect of her marriage was finding a suitable prince consort, not love. I wanted Princess Pride to fall in love with someone and live a happy life, but that was just my own selfish desire. Still, I couldn’t get the image of their two plastered-on smiles out of my mind.

I shivered from a sudden chill. When I looked at Stale, he was pressing his fingers to the black frames of his glasses, eyes wide open, a dark aura emanating from his body.

“I’ll bring it up with Mother tomorrow after Prince Leon goes home,” he said. “I’ll also ask what makes him a fitting partner for Elder Sister.”

Despite his terrifying demeanor, there was fear in his voice. Still, I relaxed a little knowing he’d try to advocate for Princess Pride.

“I won’t be able to celebrate Her Highness’ marriage either at this rate,” I said.

“Right. If anything, you might have to use that sword of yours.”

“What the hell?!” That was taking things *way* too far. I couldn’t attack a prince! But Stale was already mumbling to himself, plotting and scheming.

“It’d be easiest if he really did do something with another woman and I could get some kind of proof...”

Gimme a break. I’d cut down any man on the spot if he cheated on Princess Pride.

“I hope he doesn’t try anything funny with Her Highness before he goes home tomorrow.”

Stale and I might be able to help Princess Pride if we managed to get the truth from her own mouth while Prince Leon wasn’t around. If he really *did* have something on her, and she felt like she had to do whatever he wanted, then... I switched my grip to the sword sheathed at my hip.

“Look, Stale, I know I’m the one who called you here, but make sure Princess Pride is safe until...”

Until morning. I froze before I could finish my sentence.

Stale’s face paled. Sweat dappled his brow and his eyes wavered. He wasn’t looking at me at all now. Stale usually had a blank look on his face. I’d never seen him so disturbed before.

“What’s with you, St—”

“Nothing!”

He cut me off before I could get my question out, but it was as good as a confession coming from him.

“I’m going home,” he said. “Don’t be late to practice tomorrow, got it?”

He spoke so rapidly, I could hardly understand. Stale teleported away before I had a chance to stop him. Suddenly, I had a really bad feeling about this whole thing.

An absurd thought flashed through my mind. I slapped my cheek to get the image out of my head. *Nah, there’s no way.* They’d only known each other for three days. But maybe Prince Leon’s charming words had worked on Pride. My cheeks flushed with heat. I scratched my head as a distraction. At least I’d gotten to talk to Stale. It had probably prevented me from acting rashly.

One day. Just one more day. Then I’d be able to hear about everything from the princess herself. I could help her in whatever way she needed. Princess Pride, Stale, and Tiara wouldn’t have to see that false smile anymore.

Deep down, I understood. Princess Pride had to marry Prince Leon as proof of the alliance between their countries, even if he really was an awful person below the surface. They could never call off the marriage, even though neither of them seemed genuinely interested. It was a necessity on an international level, not a personal one. That much was clear when I set my feelings aside.

Still, I couldn’t help but harbor my own wish as a citizen of this kingdom who cared about Princess Pride.

I simply wished for her to be happy.

“So, Stale, you’d like to know why I chose Prince Leon as Pride’s fiancé?”

The next morning, after seeing Prince Leon off to Anemone, I’d headed straight for a visit with Mother, the Freesian queen.

Pride had to be hiding something. Earlier, as we bid farewell to Prince Leon, she whispered, “Don’t forget the promise we made last night.” Then, when Val arrived to deliver something from the kingdom of Yaburan, she entreated him

for some sort of cryptic request as well. Tiara and I were left in the dark.

That was why I *had* to ask Mother now. I had to know the true reason why she chose Prince Leon.

“The kingdom of Anemone is our ally, and a land with which we share a long history,” the queen said. “As you’re aware, it’s extremely close to us too.”

I’d talked to Mother many times, but she was still a queen, always emanating such flawless majesty. Her voice was enough to make me shiver and shrink down. Her words cut through my doubts. Everything she said was true. Anemone had a close relationship with us. That was the reason for that joint military exercise between our new recruits and their forces each year.

“We’ve formed alliances with a few of our neighboring kingdoms over the last few years,” Mother told me. “The joint laws we began to enact with them as of last year is proof of that bond. As our long-time friend, we are obligated to forge a shared bond that assures our long-term prosperity.”

In other words, the more alliances we formed, the more necessary it became to ensure our lasting relationship with the kingdom of Anemone didn’t dwindle. Pride’s engagement to Prince Leon would certainly help. Even I knew that. If we forged alliances with other kingdoms while neglecting our relationship with Anemone, it would damage the trust that all those other lands shared with us—but a royal wedding between our princess and their prince could serve as a potent symbol of friendship and trust.

“Prince Leon has two younger brothers who are also princes in the kingdom of Anemone. However, after Albert, Vest, and I exchanged words with the three princes, we felt that Prince Leon would be the only suitable candidate. The Anemonian king supported the union as well.”

I gulped at that. *Prince Leon was the most suitable candidate? But how?* Rumors circulated about his antics with women. He’d been stripped of the right to ascend to the throne by the Anemonian king himself. So why?

“Vest and I made certain of the facts before deciding whether the prince would make a fitting Freesian citizen,” Mother said. “But then the king informed us of his wishes. For that reason, we decided to welcome him into our country.”

Why did Mother think so highly of Prince Leon? He probably had the skills to be a good ruler, but with all of the gossip and his fakes smiles...it didn't add up.

"Stale. You've been such a wonderful prince, steward to Pride, and older brother-in-law to Tiara."

The conversation suddenly turned to me. My shoulders stiffened.

"For the last year, especially, you've also expressed the desire to further your understanding of a seneschal's duties."

I nodded. It was true that I'd asked for her help one year ago. My teachers had always focused on a steward's duties and way of life ever since I was young, but I'd never truly participated in any of it. That was why, a year earlier, I asked Mother to allow me to study with Uncle Vest, the current seneschal. "When it's time," she said back then.

"The time has come."

Mother smiled elegantly as I gulped.

"Due to her engagement," she said, "Pride will have increased duties from here on out. She'll have to interact directly with Albert, Vest, and myself. And so will Prince Leon."

Those last words fell like a blow to my heart. Paying me no heed, Mother continued.

"The same goes for you. You'll be spending more time with Vest. Pride will work alongside Prince Leon and you'll work alongside Vest. You'll each take on your respective duties, Pride will marry Prince Leon, and when it's time for her to take the throne, you, as her steward—or rather, her seneschal—will support Pride and Prince Leon. One week from now, I'll allow you to work with Vest."

Any coherency fled my mind. I would work alongside Uncle Vest. Though I'd requested it once, I dreaded to hear it. It was for Pride and for the kingdom. But what Mother said was also an annihilation of the life I'd lived up until now.

I couldn't be by Pride's side anymore.

Pride had someone to replace me now, a fiancé who needed to be with her... or maybe I was the one who'd been taking Prince Leon's place all this time.

The next time I'd be by her side, she and Prince Leon would officially be husband and wife. One week from now, when Prince Leon returned from his homeland to live here as Pride's fiancé, the life I'd lived alongside Pride would end. I would have to spend my time with Uncle Vest to become the next seneschal.

What is there to be upset about? This is what I wanted.

I suddenly realized that I was clutching at my chest instead of responding to Mother. Yes, this was what I wanted. I sought to study with Uncle Vest. But it was such a sudden, stark change to my life. Prince Leon would take my place at Pride's side. And I didn't even trust him yet.

"That's what I and every other seneschal throughout history has done," Uncle Vest said, but I barely heard him.

When my brain finally began to function again, I only managed to squeak out the words, "Thank you very much." I'd never been so grateful for my naturally neutral expression.

"Even compared to all the previous stewards, you are a particularly skilled young man," Mother said. "I believe your performance as the seneschal will surpass even Vest. I look forward to seeing what you accomplish, my dear son."

Mother smiled gently. I managed to respond with a fake smile of my own. She asked if I had any other questions. When I said no, I was permitted to leave, so I made a polite exit. Although my feet carried me forward, my mind lingered behind, lost in a daze.

I knew this was coming. Ever since I asked Mother to allow me to study at Uncle Vest's side, I knew that I would have less time to spend with Pride. But that was all right with me. It was all for the sake of Pride's future and for the Freesian people. It wasn't as if our entire relationship would disappear. We would still work in the same castle and even dine together, just like always. We could even take our breaks at the same time.

But Prince Leon would always be by Pride's side now.

He'd be with her forever, just like he had been over the past three days. He'd sweet-talk her during dinner and spend breaks nuzzled up against her. She

didn't need me at her side anymore.

"Ah..."

The utterance slipped from my lips. My eyes stung as tears welled up, sure to spill if I tried to blink them away.

No, I can't. I promised Arthur I wouldn't cry yet.

I gritted my teeth and rubbed hard at my neck to hold back the tears. *It's all right. It's all right. All of this is for Pride and the people. I'm the one who decided to dedicate my life to those purposes, right? It's all right. Even if I can't be by her side, she still has Arthur and Tiara. In the future, I'll still be with her too. It's all right. If I want to be the greatest seneschal, I have to—*

"Big Brother! Did you finish your talk with Mother?"

Tiara's cheerful voice tore me out of my thoughts. I hadn't realized I'd wandered into the garden until I looked up. I didn't think I'd used my teleportation, so I must have walked there in a total fog.

My little sister's expression changed when she got a look at my face. The only people who could read my emotions through the blank look I always wore were her, Pride, and Arthur.

Tiara's eyes widened as she cried, "What's wrong?!" I pressed on the frames of my glasses to hide my eyes. I took a quick breath to regain my composure and told her I was simply tired.

Then I looked past Tiara and blinked in surprise. "Elder Sister...is asleep?"

Pride was napping there under the shadow of the garden's trees. Tiara sat beside her with Pride's arms wrapped around her waist. Pride used her sister's lap as a pillow in a strange reversal of how Tiara usually clung to her.

"She told me she didn't sleep much last night."

Tiara smiled innocently, but my stomach knotted at her words. *She really must have gone to Prince Leon's bedroom last night after all...*

Looking worried, Tiara cocked her head and asked me what was wrong. I repeated that I was just tired, but she clearly didn't believe me. Instead, she patted the grass next to Pride.

“Come sleep too, Big Brother. Do it for her.”

There was a bit of mischief in Tiara’s eyes when she smiled, and my face flushed with heat. I didn’t understand why she wanted me to sleep next to Pride, nor why that would be “for her.”

Tiara let out a pleased laugh at my flustered state and stroked Pride’s hair.

“I’ve been really lonely these past three days,” she said. “I felt like Prince Leon stole Big Sister away from me, but Big Sister invited me to the garden earlier, and that made me so happy.”

Her fingers brushed through Pride’s crimson waves. Tiara’s smile was enough to calm my own heart. She drew me in and I sat at Pride’s side. With her head on Tiara’s lap, Pride was turned toward me, a look of utter peace on her face. My shoulders relaxed a bit.

“Big Sister asked me to come here with her, then she gave me a really big hug. I just know she figured out I was lonely and wanted to cheer me up. But then she said—”

“Stale?”

Tiara cut off as Pride woke. Her eyes were glazed with sleep. She blinked up at me, reaching for me in a daze.

“Huh?! Wait, P-Pride?!”

She didn’t seem to hear me. Instead, she wrapped her arms around my waist. I stiffened out of reflex as she set her head in my lap, just as she’d done with Tiara. My face burned from the tips of my ears all the way down my neck, which seemed to amuse Tiara.

What in the world was Pride doing? Even half-asleep, I couldn’t understand this. I’d never seen her in such a state, and the three of us used to nap together all the time.

I could hardly breathe. Desperate, I shook Pride’s shoulder to wake her—but it was no use. She just groaned and tightened her grip on my waist, threatening to skyrocket my already racing pulse. I called her name, my voice trembling, and Pride once again murmured my name in her sleep. I flinched. But the next

words I heard stopped my brain dead in its tracks.

“I missed you.”

Her voice was almost childlike, but quivering on the verge of tears.

Surprise washed out the rest of my emotions, freezing my body and mind. Pride kept her face buried in my lap the whole time. She shifted onto her side, her breathing growing deeper as she slumbered.

“She said the same thing to me.”

Tiara smiled shyly as she looked down at our sleeping sister.

Pride said she missed us. I thought I had been the only one to feel lonely.

Tiara’s words finally snapped me out of my daze. I looked back down at Pride, asleep on my lap. Her face was even more beautiful when she was relaxed. I slipped my hand into her soft, red hair, combing through it with my fingers. A sweet scent rose and tickled my nose. I thought I could sit there forever just doing this and never get my fill of it.



I stopped before I could get addicted. Slowly and carefully, I cradled her head and leaned down, my chest to her cheek. Her long red hair brushed my nose and mouth as I bent close to whisper my reply.

“I missed you too.”

Don't worry. I'll always be here. No matter how far apart we become, my heart will be with you. Even if I can't be by your side or if your heart belongs to that man.

My body and soul belong to you.

Knights meandered off the training grounds as each squadron called their training to a halt. I fell into the flow, leaving the yard behind to take my break.

I rubbed at my eyes, set with deep dark circles, but it made little difference. I'd stayed up all night worrying about Princess Pride and Prince Leon. It was afternoon now and all I wanted in the world was a nap, but I had to meet up with Stale for afternoon training. Besides, Prince Leon had apparently already left to return home. Perhaps Stale had gotten a chance to speak with Her Majesty.

Propelled by that faint hope, I dragged myself to the order gates. As I neared, I heard hooves drumming. I had to step back as a carriage rolled up. *Who'd be showing up at the order in a carriage this early?* I hadn't heard anything about a visitor today.

“Arthur!”

Even as I stifled a yawn, a familiar voice called out to me from the carriage. Princess Pride exited with Tiara hot on her heels.

“Y-Your Highness?!”

Was I dreaming? But no, it was really her, Princess Pride. She rushed toward me with a delighted grin. I breathed a little easier seeing a genuine smile on her face again.

“Thank goodness we caught you,” she said. “You didn't look well yesterday, so I've been worried about you.”

Shame and joy warred within me at that. Princess Pride watched me with wide eyes, but I had no idea how to respond. “Look at those bags under your eyes!” she cried, motioning for Tiara to look too.

“I’ve just had some stuff on my mind,” I said, hoping to deflect.

I tried to back away, but their worried gazes never left me. I shot a searching look at Stale, but he merely shook his head. Apparently, his conversation with the queen hadn’t gone too well. That knowledge dragged me back down and made my whole body feel heavy and limp. Even right there in front of Princess Pride, I let my head hang.

“Arthur, are you all right?” she asked, her face suddenly close to mine. She set her hands on my cheeks, peering more closely at my exhausted eyes.

“Whoa!” I jerked away on reflex, startled by the abrupt contact.

“I’m so sorry! I scared you, didn’t I?”

What the hell am I doing?! Princess Pride wanted to take care of me!

“Ah, no! I’m sorry! I just spaced out...”

My apology only seemed to make her more concerned. “I think you should excuse yourself from training today,” she suggested.

Ugh, this sucks. Do I really look that pathetic?

It was so strange to look at her now and see the exact same Princess Pride I’d always known. It was like the past few days and all those fake smiles had never even happened.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything yesterday,” she said. “You weren’t feeling well, yet you forced yourself to go out with us.”

Princess Pride’s face twisted with distress as she stepped nearer.

Damn it, I can’t get my brain to work. Prince Leon’s finally home, so I’ve gotta ask her about things now—like why she was making those faces. Is Prince Leon controlling her somehow? What’s going on?

“Y-Your Highness, um, I’d like to ask you something...” My thoughts were still a jumble as I tried to formulate my question. Princess Pride cocked her head

to one side.

I took a deep breath, ready to confess everything, but stopped myself. I had no right to say stuff like that to her. If Her Highness really *was* in love with Prince Leon, I'd be insulting them both terribly. She'd be completely right to hate me for a question like that.

Princess Pride and Tiara just watched me, disquiet darkening their expressions. They asked if I needed help getting back to my room so I could rest, but luckily Stale stepped in and deflected before I could get dragged away by some well-meaning knight.

Come on, come on, I've gotta say something...

"Are..." The words finally came. I knew what I had to say, what I most needed to know about this whole situation. "Are you...happy?"

My face burned, but I had to know the answer to that, if nothing else.

Princess Pride blinked with surprise. At her back, Stale and Tiara shared a glance. I wanted to run away, but instead I bit down on my cheek to bear the discomfort and watched her, determined to detect it if a moment of hesitation or deceit crossed her face. After a few moments, she smiled.

"Yes, I'm happy. I have all of you, after all."

That smile was genuine, almost too blinding to behold. My whole body relaxed at the sight. Stale and Tiara seemed more at ease too.

Thank god. All that matters is that she's happy.

I sighed, my heart suddenly lighter. Then I closed my eyes and steadied my breath, coming back to center. I still didn't get what the deal with Prince Leon was, but it didn't matter so long as Princess Pride was happy.

Her Highness called for me, concern in her voice. More relaxed, I responded to her right from the heart.

"That's good. So you weren't putting on an act, then..."

"What?"

Oops! Aw, crap!

I hadn't filtered my thoughts at all. My eyes snapped open and I fumbled for an apology. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Before I could finish, Princess Pride's smile froze. It was like I'd hit a bullseye.

When she saw how I was staring at her, she said, "No, I wasn't."

Why?

My stomach sank into my feet, erasing all the relief of a moment ago. I crouched down into a squatting position, too overcome to keep facing her upright.

"A-Arthur?! Are you all right?! I'm sorry if I worried you. But really, I'm okay! Some things *have* happened, but it's nothing for you to worry about!"

Princess Pride crouched down to touch my shoulder. Even that only made my heart ache more. I reached my hand out for her, clutching it with two fingers. I wanted to stay there with her peering at my face.

"Please let me worry about you," I said.

Unable to look her in the eyes, I kept my head down. My mind was so scrambled that I couldn't find the right words. Princess Pride crouched before me, unmoving.

"Why...? Why did you look like that during the carriage ride?" I asked her at last. "Why are you forcing yourself to put on an act? Does Prince Leon have something on you? Or are you doing it for the kingdom? Stale, Tiara, me, and everyone else are all really worried about you. You're so...so far away."

Oh god... Why did I have to say all that?

My voice trailed off into silence. I held my breath to keep from crying. I couldn't do that just yet.

"I'm sorry," she said, setting her hand over mine.

This is awful. I said I was worried about her, but now she's the one having to take care of me.

"Thank you, Arthur. You too, Stale and Tiara. It makes me happy to know you're looking out for me. But really, I'm just fine."

Yeah, I knew it.

No matter how much pain she was in, Her Highness always wanted to bear as many burdens as she could on her own. She made it seem like she *had* to bear those burdens—like her entire existence was for fighting these solitary battles.

I want to protect her smile.

It didn't matter what kind of man she ended up with—I was prepared to support her as long as she was happy. Her happiness was my happiness too.

But if my fears were correct—if Princess Pride had a reason that she couldn't truly open up to Prince Leon, if she really was just forcing herself to go through with the marriage for the good of the kingdom—that was the worst-case scenario to me. It was the marriage I dreaded most. Even so, if that was the path she'd chosen, I had no choice but to support her.

"I'll always be at your side," I said. "Forever...and always."

The words poured out of me. I lifted my head to keep my eyes on Princess Pride's face. She looked shocked by my admission, but I prayed that, if nothing else got through to her, those final words would—that she would always know she could count on me.

Princess Pride nodded slowly, smiling in earnest as she thanked me.

I would stay by her side forever. I swore that to myself over and over again. As long as Prince Leon treated her well, I'd stay with them forever to protect their happiness. If he didn't, then I would protect her from that man, protect her in *place* of that man. Nothing would change.

I'd already dedicated everything I had to Princess Pride long ago.

Chapter 2:

The Tyrannical Princess and the Secret

“MOTHER, I’VE SEEN IT in a premonition. I must travel to our allies for the sake of their people. I must go to the kingdom of Anemone!”

On that day, the noble voice of the crown princess rang out through the throne room.

“A secret mission to Anemone?” I said, so shocked I had to repeat the words aloud.

Three other knights joined me in the order’s tactical strategy room, all of them reeling after this odd declaration from my father, Commander Roderick.

“That’s right, Arthur,” Commander Roderick told me. “Her Majesty has given us direct orders. Princess Pride wants to hide the fact that she’s Freesian royalty for a secret trip to Anemone, the homeland of her new fiancé. She’s requested that the four of you escort her.”

The commander crossed his arms. Vice Commander Clark stepped up to his side.

“The timeline for the mission is a bit strange,” the vice commander warned. “You’ll be leaving five days from now, in the afternoon, then spending one night in an Anemonian inn before visiting Prince Leon the next morning. We’re to bring him back to Freesia to live in the palace as Her Highness’ fiancé.”

My eyes were as wide and disbelieving as the other knights’. It wasn’t unusual for the royal family to order a top-secret mission like this. However, the purpose and goal of this one was...unusual to say the least.

“Well, I certainly understand why you’re confused. Roderick and I don’t understand the mission either, to be perfectly honest,” Clark said. He chuckled awkwardly. “Or perhaps we can interpret it more romantically. Perhaps Her

Highness can't wait to start her life alongside the prince, so we're to bring him to her first thing in the morning as a surprise."

The mood in the room dropped at this suggestion. The whole order saw Princess Pride as a legendary figure after what she'd done for us in the ambush. Even Father and Clark saw her that way.

"But this is Princess Pride we're talking about here," Commander Roderick said.

Everyone tensed. The distaste in my father's voice was plain for all to hear.

"Her Highness' true thoughts and intentions here...whatever they may be, you're to protect her and Prince Stale, who will accompany you on the mission," he went on. "That is our ultimate duty as knights."

What could we do but agree? It was our duty as knights and a direct order from our commander.

"So, that's what happened," I told Stale later.

"Yeah, I know," Stale said. "Elder Sister suddenly went to visit Mother yesterday, but Tiara and I waited outside the room."

We fenced in Stale's practice room, our fierce bout interrupted by bursts of conversation. Our swords met, we clashed and counterattacked, then we sprang apart again.

"Tiara and I couldn't hear anything," Stale said, "but after we waited for a while, Big Sister told us she'd received permission from Mother for a secret mission into the kingdom of Anemone. She also wanted me to go, in addition to the rest of the knights. I agreed right away, of course."

As he spoke, Stale attempted to knock me off my feet, but I leapt over the attack.

"You didn't ask why she wants all this?"

"I did, but she avoided the question and told me, 'Nothing is certain yet.' Elder Sister's been keeping a lot of secrets lately."

I tossed my sword aside and grabbed Stale's arm. He teleported out of my grip and directly behind me.

"Clark thinks Her Highness just can't wait to be with Prince Leon, so she wants to go get him herself," I said.

"That's the most obvious explanation. But still..." Stale kicked to keep me at bay as he created distance between us. Then he launched forward to attack.

"There's no way in hell," I said.

"Yeah, even if by some chance she *was* under Prince Leon's thumb, I don't think she'd ever do something with so much potential to embarrass the royal family."

Stale held his blade at the ready. I retrieved my sword and lunged at him, but he sidestepped at the last moment. Our swords screeched as Stale absorbed my blows one-handedly. We pushed close together in a grapple.

"I'm sure Elder Sister has something else in mind."

"Yep. Clark and Dad thought the same thing."

"What do you think?"

"No clue. But I know one thing. There's only one thing for me...for us to do!"

I flung Stale back with all my might. Space opened between us, filled with the sound of our panting breaths.

"No matter what...we'll be there for Princess Pride. Nothin' else matters," I said.

Stale met my eyes, silent for a moment. Then he nodded solemnly.

"Right. It's your job to protect her, Arthur...for both of us."

"Huh?"

What did that mean? Stale's words sat heavy in my stomach, and my brow furrowed. It was *my* job to protect her? For both of us?

I didn't get a chance to ask about it before Stale changed the subject. "Let's stop talking about this. Tiara and Elder Sister will be here soon." With that, he sheathed his sword.

“Come on, Stale. What the hell did you mean by—”

But no sooner did I attempt to dig deeper than Tiara’s shout broke the quiet of the training room. “Arthur! Big Brother!” She and Princess Pride entered the room hand in hand.

“Arthur, are you feeling better?” Princess Pride asked.

“Oh, yes! I’m sorry if I worried you...”

I lowered my head, too ashamed to look at her. She was still fussing over me, even though I’d slept better the night before and found a new resolve. The reminder of my outburst yesterday burned in my face.

“Has Commander Roderick informed you of your mission?”

“Yes, he did! I’ll be ready to serve on the day of.”

Princess Pride relaxed and smiled when she heard that. I was glad to see it.

“If nothing happens that day...” she said, her face complicated. “Well, I don’t think anything will happen. I know it’s a lot of trouble to go through, but I deeply appreciate all your help.”

I nodded in response. Her smile was still strained, but no longer fake. It was like she’d shrugged off some unseen burden.

“Elder Sister, what are you going to do once you’ve reached Anemone?”

“You didn’t tell us anything about it yesterday,” Tiara piped up.

Princess Pride simply smiled and patted Tiara’s head. “Don’t worry. We won’t be doing anything dangerous this time.”

“So you *will* be doing something, it just isn’t dangerous?” Tiara said.

Her accusation came out of nowhere. Princess Pride’s eyes went round.

“N-not exactly. Truly, if nothing comes up, we’ll simply be entering Anemone and escorting Prince Leon back with—”

“What do you mean ‘if nothing comes up’?! What are you so worried about, Big Sister? Does it have something to do with all the things you’ve been keeping from us?!” Tiara’s attack struck with devastating accuracy. I’d never heard her speak so forcefully.

“Big Sister,” Tiara said. “Big Brother, Arthur, and I are all very, *very* worried about you. We all know you’re carrying some kind of burden. I’m sure the knights of the order are just as concerned. If Mother gave permission for your trip, then Mother and Father must know what’s going on, right? But you really can’t tell us anything?”

Princess Pride stood there, silent and flustered. I could see why. Out of everyone, Tiara was the last person she probably expected this from—not to mention the genuine anger in Tiara’s voice. None of us had ever seen Tiara actually display her temper. My jaw dropped, as did Stale’s, as we watched it unfold.

“Big Sister, I’m still weak and I can’t do anything to help you,” Tiara went on. “I won’t ask to accompany you on your trip, but I can be close to your heart. Maybe you have your own reasons for not trusting Big Brother, Arthur, and me. But...I don’t think that’s right. I’ve watched all of you for so long.”

She took Princess Pride’s hand in hers.

“Please don’t suffer through everything alone. We’ll believe whatever you tell us, even if it’s just a theory. None of us will blame you if it doesn’t end up happening.”

Princess Pride suddenly looked overcome. Her eyes shimmered. I saw her swallow as though trying to choke down an upswell of emotion.

“Please, if you do feel like you can trust us...even if it’s only a small amount, then please tell us what’s going on in your heart, Big Sister.”

Princess Pride looked at Tiara like she was a shining light, a hero in dark times. Her little sister had cut through all the confusion and noise of the past several days, getting right to the heart of the matter. Princess Pride squeezed Tiara’s hand as she gazed at each of us in turn. For our parts, Stale and I clenched our fists, eagerly watching Her Highness’s every move in anticipation of her finally speaking.

“I truly don’t know if anything will happen,” Princess Pride finally said. “It might be nothing...and it might do nothing but worry all of you.”

“I don’t mind,” we all chimed in. Tiara squeezed Princess Pride’s hand, saying,

“See?” When Princess Pride met Tiara’s gaze, she seemed to relax a little.

“Also, if...if that one thing really does happen...please don’t blame Prince Leon until you know all the facts.”

All three of us nodded, Stale a bit reluctantly. It was clear to all he would find it difficult to forgive Prince Leon if something really did happen. But Princess Pride just swallowed and squared her shoulders to face us.

“My goal is...to save Prince Leon while he’s in the kingdom of Anemone.”

Tiara clasped her hands to her chest. Stale gulped. I pressed my lips into a hard line to keep from speaking.

“He’s already backed into a corner. That’s why I want to make him happy.”

It seemed like she knew something about the prince that none of us did.

“I’ve received all the permission I need from Mother. If the ‘vision’ I saw plays out correctly, something will happen on that day.”

We stiffened at the mention of Princess Pride’s special power. Whenever she said she saw a vision of the future, she was always right.

Princess Pride began to explain that night she spent in Prince Leon’s room. As she spoke, I sensed a fierce protectiveness from her, like she wanted to shield the prince from harm.

“For his sake and for the sake of the people, please allow me to act how I wish.”

She faced us steadfastly, determined to save Prince Leon. From what, we weren’t quite sure.

It was the night before Prince Leon was to return to his homeland. He invited me to his guest bedroom. Among his tender words was a desire to stargaze together.

“Come on in. The stars are as beautiful as ever tonight,” he said, closing the door behind me. I heard the click of a lock falling into place. “I’ve been so eager to spend some time alone with you.”

Prince Leon turned his velvety-smooth smile on me. I smiled back as he retrieved a steaming pot his maid had probably prepared in advance. The soft carpet muffled his every step. Finely crafted furniture adorned the room, as befit a future member of the royal family. Curtains covered a window, but faint light twinkled in the slight gap

“Do you drink coffee?” he asked.

When I nodded and expressed my appreciation for his offer, he set about preparing cups for us. The clinking of silverware sounded behind me.

“Be careful. It’s hot,” he said.

He held out a cup and saucer for me—which I accepted with thanks—then guided me to the sofa by the curtained window. Soft leather cradled me when I sat carefully with my cup. Suddenly, the lights in the room went out.

“The stars look more beautiful this way,” Prince Leon said.

He strode toward me, enveloped in the moonlight shining through the window. The sight was so beautiful, I couldn’t move. I found myself utterly charmed as silvery light lit his handsome, smiling face. Slowly and carefully, Prince Leon sat at my side on the sofa. Our shoulders nudged against each other, warm in the night.

“Pride, nothing could be more beautiful than the sight of you in the light of the moon.”

He reached out to touch my hair, every move precise and calculated. His hand trailed from my hair to my skin...and then he kissed me. I was suddenly grateful for the darkness as my whole face burned. The prince was so much more alluring than me. His beauty was enough to make me break out in goosebumps.

I set my cup on the table. This time, his pale fingers landed on my shoulder. Slowly, he slipped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me against his toned chest. My breath caught in my throat. This wasn’t like the time we’d spent in the carriage or the gardens. His strong embrace enveloped me in his masculine aura.

“Just like this,” he murmured. “Now would be the perfect time for us to become one with each other.”

He spoke directly into my ear, his deep voice and warm breath eliciting a fresh wave of goosebumps. I moved slowly as I returned his gesture, placing my hands on his neck. He leaned over me, and the sofa creaked. With his body against mine, it was my turn to whisper into the prince's ear.

"Prince Leon, if you truly desire me, then I'll accept that. We're engaged to be married, after all."

He paused for a moment, then brushed my hair from my face. The prince placed his hand against my cheek to direct my gaze up to him. Those seductive eyes and lips of his inched closer...

"But that's not what you truly want at all," I said. "It's not necessary between the two of us."

His lips paused just before they touched mine, and then he slowly pulled away. Those bewitching jade eyes of his widened. "What do you mean?" he said, voice quiet and wavering. His arm went slack around my shoulders, and his body drifted away from mine.

Prince Leon sat upright, putting distance between us as he stared. He was silent, though his lips trembled. I chose my next words slowly and deliberately.

"It's all right, Prince Leon. These past three days, you've been absolutely flawless. You've gotten close to me as my fiancé and even tried to learn about my kingdom, just as a prince consort should. I find you to be a wonderful fiancé. It was a perfect act. I never once saw you slip up. Mother, Father, and everyone else truly saw you as the very picture of an ideal fiancé."

Prince Leon bent his whole body away from me. Perhaps I'd erred in my phrasing. He grabbed the back of the couch to get even farther away. "Why?" he asked in a rasp.

"Don't worry. On the outside, you've been loving and charming. Both as a gentleman and a prince."

"Then why? Why are you...?"

Although his expression stayed the same, his voice shook. His usual facade fell in the face of someone who could finally see through it.

“Prince Leon, our entire engagement exists to serve as proof of our alliance. There’s no need for anything more than a well-played act for the public. I think you’ll soon understand what I mean. That’s why...”

I reached out for the frightened boy, combing my fingers through his hair, enjoying the pleasant sensation.

“It’s all right. You can drop the act. You don’t have to force yourself to pretend to love me. I know the truth.”

I sat up and shuffled closer to him on the couch. He slouched back, leaving me looming over him, staring straight into those jade-green eyes.

“Prince Leon, there’s something I must tell you, but first, I want your word. Please. If you agree, I’ll keep tonight’s events entirely to myself and we’ll be back to our normal relationship by tomorrow.”

I wished I’d softened my tone instead of making it sound so threatening, but he needed to understand the importance of this. For a moment, however, he merely sat there trembling. The allure he gave off just moments ago was like a distant memory.

“Who...are you?” he said.

I was the girl who’d been reincarnated into this world, privy to its secrets thanks to my past life as an ORL player. That was the correct answer, but I couldn’t reveal all that to him. No one in this world would understand that even if I tried to explain.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I had to give him a different sort of answer.

“I’m the crown princess of Freesia, Pride Royal Ivy. I am next in line to the throne and I possess the special power of precognition. That’s how I know who you really are.”

Prince Leon squirmed to get away from me, disheveling his clothes in the process—but I was still on top of him and refused to move, so he just sank down into the sofa instead. It was like watching a robot malfunction as it froze in fits and starts. His face bore no expression; his body went into defensive mode.

I cupped his handsome face in my hands. “It’s all right,” I whispered. “I’m also the only person in this world who knows of your true desire.”

He gulped. His body went completely still, like he’d forgotten how to breathe, as he stared into my eyes with an intense gaze.

“Prince Leon, once you return home, you’re not to visit the local village outside your castle under any circumstances for the entire week. There can be no debate on this.”

He winced just slightly. It was his first reaction in quite a while, but I understood why that order elicited such emotion. Still, I pressed on.

“You must never visit that village, even for a simple observation—especially not on your final day. You’ll lose everything if you go there. First, you’ll be forced into a drunken stupor at a tavern. By the next morning, you’ll have lost the trust of your people and your king.”

This came from a flashback scene in the game regarding Leon’s past. The night before he was supposed to return to Freesia, the prince paid a visit to the local village. The next morning, the palace guards found him drunkenly passed out inside a tavern. His journey to Freesia was delayed, but his night of debauchery did more than earn Pride’s scorn. Pride tortured every man and woman who he’d interacted with at the tavern. The prince was forced to watch as they died.

Of course, I would never do such a thing, not even if Prince Leon was late in returning to Freesia, but that alone wasn’t enough to stop the incident in this case. That one night would come to haunt him as he really *would* lose everything eventually. The king would formally expel Prince Leon thanks to that evening in the tavern.

The prince held still for a while after I spoke. Even his eyes went blank and empty, almost like all thought had escaped his mind.

“Please don’t break this promise,” I said. “I can’t tell you why right now, but this is all for your well-being...and your happiness.”

I gripped both his hands in mine.

“My...happiness?” he said, turning his head slightly to the side. It was like

speaking with a doll when he looked at me this way.

“That’s right. I’ll explain the rest when we meet again.”

Slowly, I released him and sat back. The sofa creaked again. I smoothed down my messy hair and wrinkled clothes, then turned to the window once more. The starlight shone even brighter against the darkness of the room.

“The stars are lovely this evening,” I remarked. “I’ll see you again tomorrow. Good night.”

People might get the wrong idea if I stayed in his room for too long. But even as I exited, Prince Leon remained lying there on the sofa, motionless and blank-faced.

I could only pray that he would heed my warning.

Chapter 3:

The Tyrannical Princess and the Mission

THE KINGDOM OF ANEMONE was an incredibly small land, less than one-fourth the size of Freesia. Nearly half that land sat on the lip of the coast, so Anemone had become a lively trading hub thanks to its many ports. Products from overseas flowed through the kingdom, positioning it as a crucial gathering place for many other lands.

Freesia also depended heavily on Anemone. Until recently, other nations largely avoided Freesia. At one point, over 80 percent of Freesia's foreign imports came through Anemone. That number was down to around 60 percent now, still well over half.

Unlike Freesia, Anemone relied on slave labor—however, the use of slaves wasn't officially endorsed, so Anemonians generally purchased their labor outside the kingdom's borders. They also tended to bestow upon enslaved people a few rights and protections that other nations did not.

All this resulted in a bustling but compact kingdom full of shopping districts and passing traders. Shops remained open well into the evening, offering everything from cheap trinkets to expensive delicacies, and there was always something new. The shopkeepers shouted their wares to anyone passing by. It could be a bit overwhelming for outsiders, who found themselves suddenly bombarded with sales pitches.

"We're only looking for an inn," I said from the driver's seat of the carriage.

I scanned our surroundings as I drove. Beside me, Eric smiled at everyone we passed, his chestnut eyes shining beneath his matching hair. He had to refuse the wares of the traders on every side.

"I haven't seen you two around these parts before. Are you traders?" a shopkeeper asked.

"Yes," Eric said. "We're here today for an important negotiation in this city. Would you happen to know an inn where we might be able to park our

carriage?”

“How about you give me what I want and I’ll give you what you want?”

The trader held out a single piece of fruit. Eric paid for the fruit with little intention of eating it, then pressed the trader for the promised information. He recommended a luxurious inn and provided directions before leaving.

“Do you want this, Alan?” Eric asked me.

“Oh, you don’t mind? Thanks,” I said. I bit straight into the fruit, skin and all, taking care not to get any juice in my golden-brown locks. I closed my orange eyes in pleasure as I chewed.

“It’s kind of hard for me to eat fruit I’ve never seen before,” I said.

“But once you bite into it, you can tell if it’s good at least, right?” Eric asked.

“Yeah, it’s good.” I swallowed, then handed the reins to Eric and took another bite.

“I’m sure it won’t be a problem for Arthur back there in the carriage, but I wonder if Capt—if *Callum* is doing all right, what with ‘Lady Jeanne’ in there too...”

“Nah, he’s definitely a mess back there. I bet he’s totally freezing up.” I laughed as I swallowed a final bite of fruit and imagined the flustered captain.

The moment we reached the inn, Vice Captain Eric secured us a room. My personal maid, Mary, started helping Stale’s maid with our belongings. Stale, Captain Callum, and I had all dressed like run-of-the-mill nobles in an attempt to blend in. I didn’t want anyone knowing the Freesian crown princess was touring Anemone. Meanwhile, Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, and Captain Alan were disguised as our attendants.

Our room at the inn was as spacious as the kinds of apartments I remembered from my past life. It was all technically one room, but this was an inn for upper-class traders, so even a single room had a bunch of connecting chambers to accommodate us all. Due to having to service so many traders from all over, this inn spared no expense when it came to luxury.

Arthur locked the door behind us after we got ourselves and our belongings inside. I immediately turned to speak to him and Captain Callum.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“We’re perfectly fine,” Captain Callum said. “Has the long journey been taxing on you, my lady?”

“I’m all right!” Arthur chimed in, standing ramrod straight. “Sorry to have worried you.”

I was relieved by their answers, but Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric smirked from behind them.

Captain Callum and Arthur seemed normal now, but while we were in the carriage, my two excellent guards had been frozen stiff. It appeared that Captain Callum had been nervous about escorting two members of the royal family on a secret mission. As a result, he didn’t utter a single word over the course of the entire journey. Arthur, sitting beside his beloved senior knight, also stayed tight-lipped.

At least Stale was his usual self—he merely stared outside the carriage through the tiny gap in the curtains, lost in thought. Everyone was so quiet, even the two maids. Anemone was Freesia’s neighbor, so fortunately, the ride was only a few hours, but it felt endless in that tense silence.

I felt a little guilty for putting them all in this situation, but Mother had commanded me to bring along three knights of vice captain rank or higher. At least she let me choose them, which is how I got Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric. They were men I’d come to personally trust after last year’s siege on a criminals’ hideout. Arthur also spoke highly of all three, which gave me extra confidence in my decision.

“Even after Prime Minister Gilbert taught me martial arts moves, I still can’t beat Captain Alan,” Arthur told me once. “Captain Callum would be a great choice for this mission too. Dad and Clark think he’s great. And Eric’s all-around skill got him promoted to Vice Captain.”

Despite belonging to different squadrons, Arthur provided a ringing endorsement of all three. And it sounded like they looked out for Arthur as well.

When I tried asking Arthur what he thought of his own captain and vice captain in the Eighth Squadron, he described them as especially ferocious, revered throughout the order for their skill. “They’re scary,” Arthur said. I asked him why, in that case, he’d requested to join such a squadron, but all he ever told me was “I have a goal I absolutely need to accomplish.”

Before we left for our mission, I greeted the three older knights and thanked them for their assistance. They seemed even more nervous than Arthur. I tried to ease their worries.

“Out of all the captains and vice captains, I’ve selected the three of you for this top-secret mission because I believe I can trust you,” I’d told them. “I look forward to working with you over the coming days.”

All three responded decisively, although Captain Alan and Captain Callum had a slight red tinge to their faces, and Vice Captain Eric’s eyes were a bit blurry. I hoped the assignment wasn’t a disappointment to them. Though it was labeled top secret, it was really nothing more than an overnight trip.

“All right, Lady Jeanne and Lord Phillip, we’ll be just outside,” Captain Callum said.

I shook my head. “No, you’re welcome to stay here.” They must have assumed we meant to change clothes, but I stopped them. “We’ll change later, after I’m sure there’s no danger. Besides, Callum, Alan, Eric...there’s something I need to discuss with you.”

I asked our maids, who were sorting out the clothes in our luggage, to wait in another room for a while. The three knights looked a bit taken aback for a moment before agreeing to my request.

I had to inform them of my new resolve. Five days earlier, after Tiara lashed out at me, I decided to tell Stale and Arthur about what happened in Prince Leon’s bedroom. As soon as I got the story out, the boys’ anger cooled, their faces flushed, and they muttered, “So that means...last night you talked, nothing else happened, and then you went back to your room?”

Once they understood my desire to rescue Prince Leon, they agreed to help. Stale, Tiara, and Arthur all pitched in to finalize the details of the mission. It was Arthur who suggested I share the “premonition” with the other knights. He

convinced me that they would be sure to help me if I let them in on the situation.

When it came time to explain the plan to the knights, Stale asked to take over, so he explained the entirety of my goals to them from start to finish. Arthur then asked the three senior knights if they understood the situation. The rough explanation was that I'd had a premonition about Prince Leon traveling to the local village, drinking himself into a stupor, getting spotted by the palace guards, and causing a total mess. Rather than sympathy, the knights' faces darkened with anger.

Even Arthur, who'd heard the entire story before, flinched when he saw the change in the other knights. Chivalry-loving Captain Callum, free-spirited Captain Alan, and the more reserved Vice Captain Eric all turned deadly serious by the end of the explanation.

"Wouldn't such actions bring shame to him, not just as Princess Pride's fiancé, but as the prince of his kingdom?" Captain Callum asked.

"I agree," Vice Captain Eric said. "I think he should simply learn how to behave, even if he *weren't* Her Highness's fiancé."

Captain Alan turned to Stale. "Prince Stale, are we to use any degree of force in protecting Prince Leon?"

Based on their harsh criticisms, they seemed to have the wrong idea about a few key points to the story. While I itched to correct them, telling them more than they needed to know would cause a huge problem if things went downhill as I feared they would. I had to keep it all to myself for now. Besides, I could understand how it sounded from a third-party perspective.

"He has his own circumstances..." was all I could respond with, though it felt like a hollow excuse.

"If you wish to prevent the prince's actions, then perhaps Eric and I should keep watch at the tavern in question," Captain Callum suggested.

Standing at his sides, Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric nodded and clenched their fists. It wasn't a bad idea—a group of three knights should easily be able to keep a single prince safe. Stale had suggested the same thing earlier.

However, there was one problem.

“I wasn’t able to see the name of the tavern in my premonition,” I admitted, brow furrowed. “We can’t begin our search unless Prince Leon really does disappear and chaos breaks out.”

Silence reigned for a time as the knights racked their brains.

The flashback scene in the game only ever called it “a tavern,” and the only time of day mentioned was simply “the middle of the night.” Not much solid information to go on. Once Prince Leon “vanished” for a night and the search began, the game simply showed guards discovering him the next morning. It meant we couldn’t help but fall a step behind the whole debacle, but I hoped that would still be enough.

My plan was to wait until the city was abuzz with the news of the missing prince, then search for him ourselves. There was little else we could do. The guards wouldn’t discover him until the next morning, but if the people of Anemone found out the identity of the disguised and disgraced Prince Leon before then, we would have a mess on our hands.

I’d already done what I could to prevent that outcome. That wasn’t much comfort to the knights, who shifted from foot to foot. They took up defensive positions around the inn, but they seemed restless as we ordered meals and prepared to wait for nightfall.

I looked out the window where Vice Captain Eric waited. Nothing would happen until evening. We might avoid the worst-case scenario entirely, but if we didn’t, Mother had given me permission to meet with the Anemonian king personally.

As the sky grew dimmer, the faint light of the moon heralded the start of a rocky night.

From the very day I was born, everyone in Anemone expected me to fulfill the role of the firstborn prince of the kingdom. A year later, I had a younger brother and, the year after that, a second younger brother. I was Leon Adonis Coronaria and I was meant to be both a role model to my brothers and the protector of

this kingdom.

“Leon, as the firstborn prince, you must behave in ways your brothers can emulate and become the king the people desire.” My father had instilled this lesson in me since my earliest memories, but he did little actual parenting.

A wet nurse took care of me for as long as I could remember, until I started studying under teachers of many difficult disciplines. My occasional meetings with Father and Mother were steeped in formality. I progressed in my studies and, once I reached the proper age, began studying fencing and martial arts for self-defense.

Study, study, eat, study, study, eat... That was the entirety of my life.

I sought out high society at a young age, eager to interact with aristocrats and foreign royalty. Women in particular often praised my looks. They called me beautiful, like a work of art. Some even claimed love at first sight.

Such treatment earned me many pleasant relationships. Most importantly, I learned about things that would never come up in formal studies, things no instructor would teach me. I learned about the harsh realities of the world.

However, whenever anyone asked me about my hobbies and interests, I had little to tell them. Studying to become the next king was my entire life. Nothing else made any sense to me. Yet despite my strict studies, I always had one pestering question on my mind:

What kind of king do people actually want?

Was it really as simple as studying to gain knowledge and skills? If that was the case, there was no need for the king to be royalty...or even me at all. It was something anyone could do. The role wasn't special.

I went to Father with this question when I turned ten. All he told me was that it was an answer I needed to discover for myself. When he saw my confusion, he took me into the local village for the very first time.

We boarded a carriage for members of the royal family and traveled to the site of a trading vessel crowded with people. The commotion seeped into the carriage. As soon as we stepped outside, it was like being thrust into a whirlpool of voices. The moment they saw Father, they all cried, “Your Majesty!”

Then, when they saw me trailing behind him, their eyes lit up. “Prince Leon!” the people shouted, jubilant. *“Prince Leon!”*

I’d never met any of these people in my life, yet they called out for me like we were old friends. When I followed Father’s example and waved back at them, the cacophony of voices grew louder.

“What kind of king do people want?” my father said softly. “Here is your answer.”

To this day, those words were burned into my heart.

This was unlike anything I’d experienced among the upper class. My heart swelled with warmth as their voices reverberated in my ears. Here, I found genuine joy, genuine love, not merely a comment about my appearance.

I’d spent my ten years of life feeling nothing at all, but that day, my withered heart came back to life. My hands trembled; my pulse raced. This tidal wave of emotion was like a storm inside me. I felt alive for the first time.

Until then, I’d dedicated my life to studying dry, gray texts, but now the whole world exploded with color and vibrancy. For the first time, I had an earnest desire that lodged itself in my very soul, screaming in echoes to be known.

“I want to be wanted.”

Mere “duty” had never inspired me like this. I knew in that moment what I wanted most.

After that, I began taking on even more studies so I could become king. I earned Father’s approval and, with each year, he let me participate more and more in his daily duties. I never once forgot that day in the village, though, and even got permission to go back whenever I had time. Every encounter with the citizenry reverberated in my heart—the way they looked at me, the way they stared. There was a light in their eyes that made me feel more human.

I traveled the towns and villages, listening to everyone I came across. Sometimes, I even brought their thoughts back to Father, dressing it up in ways that could affect real change in our kingdom.

When I met their gazes, and their faces turned red, my heart leapt in my

chest. When I took their hands in mine, I could feel the truth of that connection. When we talked, it was like gaining a new friend. I met with the people many times, becoming so familiar with them that they genuinely felt like family. That human warmth was something I'd never once felt from my real family.

The more time I spent doing all this, the more I knew that I wanted to be loved. I wanted to be wanted. I wanted to be *needed*. This desire became insatiable in me.

"Those are dangerous feelings, Big Brother," my younger brother Erwin said.

I was fourteen, and we were out running errands for Father. He asked if I was feeling well, so I explained my desire to be with the people, to be wanted, to be loved.

"That probably means you just want approval from others," he told me. "It's just narcissism; you want to monopolize them. You shouldn't talk to people like that or your reputation as the perfect prince will be sullied."

I would never forget the shock I felt when my brother chastised me so. I'd always worked so hard to be a role model to him...and now he sneered at me.

Suffused with shame, I sealed away my emotions. I felt I had to discard my repulsive "narcissism" to become king. To that end, I stopped making trips outside the castle. Instead, I spoke to the employees and maids who worked in the castle, came to know them better, and occasionally asked them about life in the village. That helped quell the rumblings in my heart.

Yet the desire lingered in my body and soul. *"I want to visit the village."*

I wanted to see them, feel their emotions, learn more about them.

Half a year later, I began making regular trips down to the village again. "How have you been?" "I'm so glad to see you again." Those words were enough to fill my empty heart. I knew my behavior did not suit a king, but I couldn't help myself.

"Big Brother, what say you form relationships with members of high society

instead?”

I had just turned fifteen, and I still struggled with my feelings. Homer—the third-born prince—happened to catch me out on a trip, so I confessed everything to him.

“You’re a very handsome young man, Big Brother, and the ladies always have good things to say about your looks. I think they’ll accept you if you open up to them! That might help fill the hole in your heart without having to visit the locals from the village.”

Too ashamed by receiving help from my younger brother to argue, I agreed to go along with his suggestion. If I could simply fill the void in my heart from having no bonds with peers or family, I was certain all my dangerous feelings and desires would cease to haunt me.

I began to converse with ladies of high society who were close to me in age. As the firstborn prince, I’d always kept a certain amount of distance when it came to these kinds of things. Speaking to them did help a bit. They were charming. They wanted to get to know me. Their kindness truly did provide salvation, but it did not heal my heart the same way meeting the common people did.

And no matter how I tried to remain neutral, they always tried to get me alone. Each woman wanted me to favor her over the others—no speaking to other women. As the firstborn prince, I couldn’t just choose a romantic partner or fiancée so easily. These women were aware of that. I thought they saw me as a friend, but that wasn’t the case at all. They wanted love, desire, and the status they thought I could provide. That sparkle in their eyes wasn’t genuine interest so much as lust for power.

Narcissism. Greed. The desire to monopolize someone.

Hadn’t I done the very same thing to the citizens I meant to protect? Despite all my time spent trying to be a better king for them, I went and treated them the way these women treated me. I’d made a grave error as future ruler.

I tried to tell the women that I couldn’t give them what they wanted. Thanks to my title, they didn’t lash out in anger. All such encounters ended sadly but peacefully.

However, it was around this time that rumors sprang up labeling me a playboy and a philanderer. Word spread like wildfire through the upper and middle classes. During my trips to the local village, even some of the citizens I once considered friends spread the gossip around. I tried to explain to Mother, Father, and my brothers, but it didn't stop the lies from disseminating. For two years, the rumors only grew.

Then I was seventeen and had to interact with high society more frequently. Unfortunately, all those young ladies I'd turned down years before sneered at my intentions now. It only intensified the misinformation about me. Eventually, Father had to order me to stay away from high society altogether. I became a source of shame even for my younger brothers, though they professed to believe my claims of innocence.

I was a blemish to the royal family. The only thing I was still allowed to do was visit the towns and villages in the hopes of clearing up the misunderstandings. Those times spent with the citizens revitalized my spirit. Even if those feelings were corrupt, they were all I had left, my only relief.

I shut my pain away and suppressed my problematic desires, trying my best not to demand too much from the villagers. What else could I do? Then, during that time, my father called me for a meeting and my future was finally decided.

I would be engaged to the crown princess of Freesia. My status as heir to the throne was no more.

The firstborn princess of the kingdom of Freesia had received her official title of crown princess before she even turned sixteen. She was a suitable successor to that kingdom. And I would be her prince consort.

"Two years, and yet the rumors only continue to spread," Father said. "A person embroiled in such scandal can't be allowed to rule over the kingdom, but you have the right character and talents to become a ruler. Freesia is a very important ally to our kingdom. You might escape the rumors there. That's why I want you to become their prince consort and serve as a mediator between our two lands."

Those were just about the kindest words Father had ever said to me.

"You have what it takes to be king. I know that better than anyone. That's

exactly why it's important that you put your potential to use in Freesia as the prince consort, if you can't put it to use for this kingdom any longer."

I swallowed my emotions and agreed to Father's directive. He'd grown thin and pale over the years. I couldn't help worrying that the rumors about me accounted for his fragile appearance. Yet he still believed I could lead and entrusted me with the critical relationship between Anemone and Freesia. My heart swelled with gratitude. and I swore to do all I could for the Anemonian people.

If I was to become prince consort in a great and respected kingdom like Freesia, I would have to work hard. Despite my twisted desires, I was somehow being given the honor of this responsibility. I had to contribute in every way I could.

Perhaps having a fiancé would help prevent the kinds of incidents I'd encountered with the high society ladies in Anemone. With my fate sealed and my wife decided, there could be no more misunderstandings. All I had to do was give the crown princess of Freesia what all those women had sought from me—the words, actions, and gestures of love.

It was all laid out before me now. I just had to play my role. If I managed that, then everything would go as planned. The source of the foul rumors would dry up. I could even apply my studies to my new life in Freesia, to the benefit of both of our kingdoms.

After Father explained all this, I went to speak to the queen, prince consort, and seneschal of Freesia, and my engagement to the crown princess was finalized. Father, Mother, and my younger brothers seemed satisfied with the end result.

This was a blessing. As the man who'd failed as a king, an older brother, and a human being, I was now able to aid both Anemone and Freesia.

I existed to serve the two lands. That was what I told myself over and over in the following days. Then Father and I visited the kingdom of Freesia together on Princess Pride's sixteenth birthday.

She was beautiful. Her smile only emphasized her elegance as we stood in the moonlight together prior to the announcement. She radiated a dazzling light.

Everyone around her couldn't help but love her, yet that love went both ways; she cared deeply for the people of her kingdom in return. In short, she was everything I desired.

Maybe I can fall in love with her.

That hope flashed through my mind. She embodied so many of the things I wanted. Perhaps loving her could finally fill the wretched hole in my heart. I would whisper sweet nothings in her ear, take her hand, and play the part of the devoted lover. Surely she would love me just as the others did. All I had to do was I could devote myself to her the way all those young noblewomen had wanted. Then I just had to fall in love with her, and everything would be solved. I prayed that someday, my heart would be filled by her love. But even if I never *did* come to love her, I just had to play my role and behave the way the princess, the queen, the prince consort, Father, Mother, and my younger brothers wanted me to. Whether or not my feelings blossomed, I had to do everything I could for the sake of both Freesia and Anemone.

"But that's not what you truly want at all. It's not necessary between the two of us."

This woman had the power of precognition.

She knew everything. She saw through my fake smile, my empty words, my acting, the false show of love I put on for others to see. The way I'd acted for the past three days was a slap in the face if she didn't actually believe it. All those public shows of flattery had been a farce. She had to hate me for this. I'd screwed it all up again. I'd already botched the important relationship between our kingdoms.

Anemone sat between a vast ocean and Freesia itself. If I'd just earned Freesia's scorn, her nation could pit its far superior strength against us. Freesia was the most feared kingdom in the world for its people's special powers, as well as its size. By comparison, Anemone was just a small trading hub. We owed our status to Freesia, as it acted as a buffer between our tiny kingdom and the rest of the world. But they wouldn't be our only enemy if our alliance fell apart. Despite our vast ports and lively trade, we had almost no way of waging an international war, making us an easy target for attacks.

Furthermore, we still owed Freesia a large debt for their help in an incident five years prior. Our kingdom's knights, on their way to a joint training session with Freesia's new recruits, were ambushed and kidnapped by thugs, only to be saved with Freesia's help. Our knights had gone out to greet the Freesian recruits, but in the end, we only caused them more trouble. Anemone even failed to arrive in time for a rescue when the Freesian knights were caught up in another attack on a collapsing cliffside. A few days later, our rescued knights returned home instead of heading to the nearer kingdom of Freesia. The whole thing threatened the friendship between our kingdoms.

We still owed them a debt of gratitude for rescuing the knights. On top of all of that, I'd just insulted Pride by peppering her with false desires she'd seen right through. And yet, she chose to play along. Knowing my kingdom's circumstances, she told me she wouldn't expose me, for the sake of our kingdoms.

The next morning, on the day of my departure, she acted as if nothing had happened, but she reminded me of her words one last time.

"Don't forget our promise."

I returned to Anemone and rushed to Father to give him my report. I also told him that I would refrain from visiting the village during this remaining week in Anemone. I had to eliminate any possibility of hurting the relationship between Pride and me. She'd been so careful to save that promise for when the two of us were alone and no one else could hear.

"With the engagement, I can't risk any further misunderstandings," I told Father.

He agreed, but he seemed to be holding something back, as if there was more he wanted to tell me. Instead, he merely asked me to have dinner alone with him that night.

I arrived at dinner bracing for the worst, but I never could have guessed what he'd actually say.

"Leon, I may be breaking off your engagement to Princess Pride."

My knife and fork clattered as they dropped from limp hands.

What does that mean? I couldn't be a good king and now I'm even lacking as a fiancé?

"I'm sorry. I know you made such an effort over these past three days..."

I wanted to demand an explanation, but I just couldn't speak. Regardless of the reason, if this was what Father wanted, then it was my job to obey.

"In a week, I'm going to request the preparations for you to move into the Freesian castle, as well as an apology gift for their kingdom," he went on. "Once we arrive, I'll speak to the Freesian queen and prince consort once more. Of course, if they don't cancel the engagement, I'll ask you to move into their castle as Princess Pride's fiancé."

Once he finished speaking, he lowered himself into a bow. It was the first time he'd ever made such a gesture toward me.

I didn't understand it. When my tongue finally came unstuck, I asked him what was going on, if I'd failed somehow, what happened over that three-day trip—but Father told me he couldn't explain anything to me yet, then dipped low again. "I'm truly sorry for causing so much uncertainty."

But you haven't. You haven't done anything bad to me. I'm the one who's never been up to par.

Father constantly thought about and worked for the good of the kingdom. He even let a person like me weigh on his mind. He left me in charge of the relationship with our crucial ally too. But I wasn't fit to be the ruler of either kingdom. If I'd failed as a king, as a person, and as a fiancé...then what good was I?

Over the next five days, Father secretly prepared gifts for Freesia, as well as an apology gift, while also ordering the palace staff to prepare for my move just in case. He readied precious treasures from our kingdom, fine goods from faraway lands, and even permission for Freesia to begin trading at some of our ports.

What exactly is it that I lack? When I watched the servants rush around the castle for the sake of an engagement that might not even happen, my heart ached with guilt.

Mother, who likely knew Father's intentions, was naturally concerned about me, as were my younger brothers.

"Don't worry, there's a good reason for this," Mother assured me. "There's no need for you to fret."

"When you look so gloomy, you worry everyone else in the castle too. Why don't you go to the village to distract yourself?"

"I think you should get a bit of fresh air, Big Brother."

Yet I stayed locked up in the castle, refusing to visit the villages and towns as I normally would, and they peppered me with their concerns over and over.

Truthfully, I *did* want to travel...but I couldn't. There was no way I could allow myself to give in to my greed while I caused so much trouble for Father and the Anemonian people. Most importantly, I couldn't be the cause of even more disrespect toward Pride and the Freesian kingdom. I'd promised I wouldn't go to the village.

Instead, I holed up in my room with the door locked, desperate for the time to pass. I devoted myself to my studies to try to keep from going mad during the long days. And then, finally, the fateful day lay within reach.

Just one more day. By tomorrow morning, Father and I would be heading to Freesia. If Father's discussions with the Freesian queen were successful, my engagement would be canceled, and I would return to my kingdom as the firstborn prince who brought dishonor to his entire country. If the discussions failed, I would remain Princess Pride's fiancé, the man who'd disrespected the kingdom of Freesia...and I would rarely set foot in my homeland again.

Where exactly does my happiness lie between these outcomes?

I cradled my head and leaned down onto my desk. If I truly did lack the proper emotions, I wished fear had left me first. *Just how much does Pride know? What reasoning does Father have? What exactly did I do wrong?*

I don't get it. I don't get it. I don't get it!

My brain teetered on the verge of madness. The hopelessness threatened to crush me from the inside, the shame rising like a dark pool to slowly drown me.

Knock knock...

“Hey, Big Brother? Are you asleep already?”

I lifted my head at the sound. Erwin, my younger brother, was calling for me. I hadn't looked up in so long that the sky outside my window was dark. The days were slipping by, perhaps because I spent so much time in my room, not even leaving to eat. My sense of time was collapsing.

“The servants were all worried to see that you didn't come to dinner,” Homer chimed in. “They're upset, since they believe they'll be bidding you farewell forever now.”

Now my little brothers were worrying about me. I was supposed to be the one protecting *them*, yet they constantly fretted on my behalf. I even managed to hurt the servants in all this. I was truly a foolish prince down to my core.

I unlocked the door and let my brothers inside. They'd arrived without their personal guards by the looks of it. Homer locked the door behind him, then turned toward me.

“Here, Big Brother.”

Homer handed me something wrapped in cloth. I took it from him, looked inside, and blinked with surprise. It was an outfit with a hat, but these weren't the kinds of clothes I wore on a daily basis; they almost looked as if they might belong to a commoner...

“Please take these and head to the village,” Erwin instructed. “If you wear these clothes as you mingle with the townsfolk, no one will notice who you are. Leave the rest to Homer and me. We already led the guards away so that you can escape without being noticed.”

Erwin and Homer both smiled kindly at me.

“We heard that you haven't visited the village lately, both for the good of the kingdom and for your fiancée,” Homer said. “With these clothes, no one will know where you've gone.”

Erwin gave a big nod. “All we want is for you to be happy, Big Brother.”

I stood there, stunned. I couldn't believe they'd gone to such trouble just to

let me visit the village on my last night in the kingdom. Overwhelming gratitude filled my chest. They'd gone to such lengths for a no-good brother like me.

"Happiness..."

"What we want..."

They continued speaking, but I caught only scraps in my daze as my heart began to throb again.

That's right. What I want is to go to town and speak to the people there. But what I needed to do was continue behaving properly for everyone else. My brothers wanted me to be happy, but the cost would be too high. With my hands trembling, I tightened my grip around the clothes in my hands.

Then I pushed them back toward Homer.

"I'm sorry, you two, but I just can't do that."

The chances were incredibly slim, but if Father found out I'd gone to the village, I'd only make more trouble for him. Besides...

"Prince Leon, once you return home, you're not to visit the local village outside your castle under any circumstances for the entire week. There can be no debate on this."

That was my fiancé's wish. Even if our engagement was only temporary, I had a duty to uphold my promise.

Plus, I couldn't shake her dire warning from my mind. She told me I would lose everything by going to the village—Father's trust, the people's love, *everything*. That would be too much to bear. My heart, with all its flaws, would break into pieces for good.

"Why not?!" Erwin cried. "This is your last chance! It's only one night, and I'm certain the townsfolk wish to see you too."

"Erwin is right! You only need to return before anyone notices you're gone. We'll help. Don't you miss seeing everyone, Big Brother?!"

Their words stung my heart. An admission that I missed them bubbled up in my throat, but I simply couldn't go. I was still the firstborn prince of this kingdom. No matter the rumors and rejection I faced, I couldn't lash out by

breaking rules. Even if no one ever found out, the guilt of betraying Father, Mother, everyone at the castle, and even Pride would weigh on me forever.

I didn't care what others said about me as a prince, a fiancé, or a member of the royal family—I was doing this for my own integrity. All my faults only made me even more determined to not add to my list of sins.

My brothers continued trying to persuade me, but I refused to give in. Finally, they exchanged glances and gave up their protests.

"If you really insist, then we'll respect your wishes," Erwin said, stepping closer. "I hate how powerless I am when it comes to you. Homer and I weren't even able to do one last thing for you."

"That's not true, Erwin. I'm the one who couldn't do anything for you two as your older brother."

I set my hands on my brothers' shoulders. They hung their heads, but they looked up to smile at me when I spoke. Erwin even tried to offer me the other bundle one last time.

"It's not just the townsfolk," he said. "Tonight may be one of the few opportunities for the three of us to spend time together without any obligations. If, as our older brother, you're truly sad to say goodbye, won't you listen to one last selfish desire of ours?"

I opened the bundle to see what was inside. Wine. An engagement present. My heart ached, but I tried to smile and thank them. They didn't know that Father was attempting to end the engagement; only Mother and I realized that.

Homer and Erwin asked me what I planned to do. I already had glasses in my room. If I couldn't say a proper goodbye to the townsfolk, at the very least, I could say it to my brothers, who still cared about me despite all I'd done.

I woke up in a tavern.

Why am I here?

A fog clouded my mind, making it hard to sort through the questions that consumed me. My vision was blurry. Everything reeked of alcohol. Before I

dared pass out again, I wordlessly pushed up from where I slumped over a table. All around me, townsfolk drank and chatted cheerfully. A group of women wearing ample rouge peered down at my face.

“Hey there. Did you get left behind here, mister? Do you wanna drink with us?”

“Heh heh. He was already like that when he got here. I wonder what kinds of mischief he was up to before he arrived?”

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha! Just leave the man alone! The people with him said he was the one dragging them all over the place! I heard he wouldn’t stop begging them to find a little-known tavern for drinks! They tried helpin’ him get his drinks down, but when that was too annoying, they just hit the road without him.”

“Aww, they should’ve stayed to have fun. They left behind enough money for everyone to have a round.”

“With this cash, we get to drink as much as we want! Let’s close up shop so we don’t have to share!”

“Don’t you dare close anything, moron! This is my tavern! Ugh. Fine, then. Just this once!”

“All right! We’re drinkin’ till morning, everybody!”

A roar of jubilation shook the air.

Oh... It’s them. The voices and smiles I wanted to hear... They’re so close to me. That’s right... I missed them so much.

I finally got to see them again. I knew it was a dangerous desire, but once the realization hit me, I began to cry.

Thank goodness, I can see them one last time before I leave the kingdom and... do what? I suddenly felt like I was forgetting something important, but my fuzzy brain refused to work properly. The booze and tears had obscured my vision enough that all I could see was a blur of light. I tried bracing against the table to get my head up, but my arms trembled. I couldn’t seem to move. The townspeople’s cheerful clamor rang harsh in my ears. All this time, I’d just

wanted to become the kind of king the people desired, but in order to do that I was supposed to stay away from shameful situations like this.

“You’re not to visit the local village outside your castle.”

Those words echoed in my mind, but I couldn’t remember why they seemed so important, or who had said them.

“Especially not on your final day.”

My final day? What does that mean? Right... Why didn’t I come to the village until now? Wait, why am I here?

My thoughts scattered like marbles flung across a table. I couldn’t hold on to any of them for long, but someone’s voice rang out in my head like a warning bell.

“You’ll lose everything if you go there.”

Everything? I’ll lose...everything? What else do I have to lose? I’ve already failed as royalty, as a king, as a prince, as a fiancé, as a person.

A woman commented that I seemed too warm and removed my jacket. The cool air soothed my overheated mind; I could breathe a little easier. I wanted to thank them, but I couldn’t seem to form the words. I only mustered little grunts, which the women called “cute” as they stroked the top of my hat.

“First you’ll be forced into a drunken stupor at a tavern. By the next morning...”

A tavern? Oh, that’s where I am. A drunken stupor... I guess I am drunk...even though this has never happened to me before.

The women began to unbutton my shirt. With two, then three buttons open at my chest, my breathing came even easier. The air cooled me down and made the world feel a little steadier. I closed my eyes with my head still down on the table. I was sure this was all a dream. A comfortable, convenient dream...

“You’ll have lost the trust of your people and your king.”

A chill ran down my spine.

My body—warm and flushed only a moment ago—suddenly went stone cold.

Lose their trust?! No, I can't let that happen. I can't any of their trust!

Fear broke through the confusion. My heart raced, my body suddenly alert and functional as I jerked my head up at last.

Yet my body and mouth were both otherwise frozen.

My eyes were open, but my vision remained cloudy. I could hardly even blink my half-closed eyes. I couldn't move of my own free will and half my clothes were gone thanks to those women. Lifting my head had taken everything I had. It was like my body wasn't my own anymore.

I broke our promise.

My body wouldn't respond, but my mind was finally grinding back to life.

Pride had been so thorough in her warning too.

Her prediction was right. I was drunk in a tavern, which surely meant that the rest of what she said was coming next. I would lose everything—the trust of my father and the trust of the people. Everything.

I'd rather just die.

I would bring shame to the royal family, fail to form a good relationship with Freesia, and probably hurt Pride as well. Even though she'd been so kind to a complete stranger like me.

I was ruining absolutely everything for the whole kingdom. The people here lived good lives. If I formed a strong bond with the citizens of Freesia, their lives could be even better. But at this rate, there was no future for our peaceful little kingdom. We could lose our trade negotiations, our commerce, even our peaceful status. War wasn't out of the question, thanks to me.

All around me, the townsfolk smiled and laughed. Their mirth cut me like a dagger. I was going to steal those smiles away.

"Hey, let me get that hat off for you. I bet it's real stuffy, right? I wanna get a look at your face too."

A woman's voice broke through my frantic thoughts.

No, she can't. I visit this village often enough that the people know my face. If

she takes my hat off, they'll realize who I really am.

"You'll lose everything."

The woman's fingers gripped my hat. She lifted it slightly and my hair fell out. She murmured that I had beautiful hair. Then the hat continued upward, ever so slowly.

No, no, no, no, no no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! Somebody! Anybody!

I tried to resist, to reach for that hat and stop her, but my body merely quivered in response to my urgent cries. *No! She can't see my face!*

Suddenly, my vision went completely dark.

No, it wasn't just me. The entire tavern was plunged into darkness. The woman who'd been about to remove my hat shrieked, and the rest of the occupants joined her in crying out.

"What the hell's going on?!"

"Hey! Where's the lamp?!"

"I think it's over here."

"What's this?! The lamp's covered in something. I can't light it!"

"Yeah, same here! I can't see. What is this stuff?! When did it get here?!"

Their confused wails filled the tavern. The women nearest to me whimpered in fear.

"That about does it. Thanks for the good booze, rich boy."

Footsteps pounded toward me, and someone scooped me off the table. I couldn't resist; I couldn't do anything but lay limp in their arms as they carried me away. Even though my eyes were open, I couldn't see a thing through the thick darkness. When my captor, a grown man, bumped into people, they shrieked in terror and alarm, until finally we reached the door.

"You first," the man grunted, apparently to someone nearby. Then we were leaving the tavern.

A breeze swept through my hair. The moment the door closed behind us, the

man carrying me broke into laughter.

“Mwa ha ha ha! Never thought I’d get the chance to carry out another kidnapping. Fun stuff, ain’t it?”

I didn’t have a clue what was going on and my consciousness was fading swiftly.

I must be having a bad dream...

“Hey there, Mistress. Took ya long enough.”

A familiar face greeted us.

The moment we heard that Prince Leon was missing, the three knights and I teleported to an acquaintance of ours via Stale’s special power. We found ourselves outside in a deserted alleyway. I searched, but I didn’t spot any townspeople, even out on the main street.

“Val,” I said, “thank you for all your hard work over the past week. How did it go?”

Val smirked, sitting with his weight against the wall. Khemet sat in his lap, while Sefekh ran up to see me.

One week earlier, I asked Val to start monitoring Prince Leon.

My instructions were to wait outside the Anemonian castle and follow Prince Leon, should he leave. If the prince tried to slip away to the village, even in disguise, then Val had to keep the public from discovering his identity. I even allowed some wiggle room for roughness so he could do whatever it took to protect the prince.

When I told my companions about this, they all gaped at me in surprise. They didn’t expect the royal family’s delivery person to end up in charge of a stakeout. The knights were especially shocked—they hadn’t realized that that delivery person was the very same man they’d captured during the ambush on the order five years ago.

“The package you asked for is inside,” Val said. “Heh! He’s a real lady-killer, huh?”

Val rapped against the wall. When I looked closer, I realized it was a bit thicker than others nearby.

“You have him already? When did you take him?!”

Val smirked. “He was wasted at a tavern and these gals started taking his clothes off. I jumped in right before they got his hat off, took out all the lights, and abducted your prince here.”

I do wish he’d call it “safeguarding” instead of “abducting.”

“It was amazing!” Khemet piped up. He rushed on to explain how Val had extinguished every light in the tavern all at once with sand from his mail bag. In the pitch darkness, he led the two children back out while carrying Prince Leon. His less-than-savory former life certainly helped in the scheme.

“He’s like some kind of nocturnal animal,” Sefekh said, to which Val clicked his tongue.

I thanked all three of them before turning my attention to that strange wall. Prince Leon apparently waited behind it. It resembled a normal wall at a glance, albeit a little thicker, complete with intricate details. This had to be Val’s handiwork, with some help from Khemet amplifying his powers. Any townspeople or guard who passed this wall would think nothing of it. It was a good thing Val and Khemet hadn’t teamed up like this back in Val’s days as a criminal.

I ordered Val to take down the wall. He sat up and snapped his fingers with a bemused look. The wall crumbled into ordinary dirt, revealing Prince Leon lying on his side, fast asleep. Mud from the collapsed wall smeared his beautiful face.

“He was awake when I nabbed him, but once I got him here, he passed right out,” Val told me.

I approached to hold my hand in front of Prince Leon’s mouth. I could feel his breath, but when I touched his forehead, he was burning hot. He seemed a little too limp, even for someone sleeping, so I asked Stale to teleport Prince Leon back to the room while the rest of us followed.

“Come with us, you three,” I said. “I want to hear more about this incident.”

Val yawned but agreed. Sefekh and Khemet simply nodded in tandem.

I turned to find Arthur and the rest of the knights...only to feel their murderous aura. They hadn't spoken this entire time, but the way they glared at Val made it clear they still held a grudge. Except they weren't even looking at Val—they were looking at the place where Prince Leon had been. Even Stale seemed uneasy.

Were they all upset about how drunk Prince Leon had gotten? I wasn't thrilled about it either, but that was a concern for after the prince sobered up. First, we needed Stale to get us all back to the room.

“Lady Jeanne!” Captain Callum, who'd been waiting behind at the inn, called out to me as soon as I arrived. He was trying to move the sleeping Prince Leon to a nearby sofa. Mary the maid quickly poured a cup of water and handed it to the captain.

“How is my fiancé doing?” I asked.

Prince Leon would probably be okay; he'd merely had too much to drink. Yet Captain Callum looked concerned.

“It appears that he's in a bit of a strange state. I believe he may be...”

Captain Callum hesitated, his expression turning grim. Could Prince Leon have drunk so much that he actually had alcohol poisoning? He was unusually slack. Maybe this was no ordinary night out.

Arthur's power to heal diseases won't be able to sober Prince Leon up, but if this is alcohol poisoning, then maybe he can fix it.

I opened my mouth to ask just that.

“What are you thinkin'? Water's not gonna help the kid. He's high as a kite,” Val snorted.

Captain Callum furrowed his brow. I was similarly confused.

“High? What do you mean, Val?” I said.

“Just look at him. Booze alone doesn’t do that to a guy. See, your knight knows exactly what I mean.”

Val stared straight at Captain Callum. The captain, along with Vice Captain Eric, both studied Prince Leon intently now, the blood draining from their faces.

“Indeed... This appears to be...” Vice Captain Eric faltered. His chestnut-colored eyes had gone wide. Arthur and Captain Alan stared at the other two knights, clearly out of the loop.

Val huffed with exasperation. “He was forced into drinking booze after he got brought to the tavern, but nothing other than drugs would do this to a man.”

He said the drug appeared to be a combination of sleeping pills and anesthetic, taking the user in and out of consciousness while also keeping them paralyzed. “It’s expensive as hell, though, so it’s only used as a last resort,” he added, making a little gesture with his fingers to signify money. “It’s odorless and tasteless, so we used it in human trafficking whenever we found someone we wanted to nab.”

When Val grinned at the rest of us, Sefekh cried out “Don’t teach Khemet bad things!” and stomped on Val’s foot. Val yelped in pain, clutched his foot, and glared at the girl.

“So you use it to capture people like Powe—I mean, people with superior special powers,” Stale said.

Val shrugged. “Only if there’s no other way to nab them.”

“But this drug is incredibly strong. How could someone do that to a prince?!” Vice Captain Eric asked.

Captain Callum nodded silently.

“You’re exaggeratin’, Mister Knight. He’ll be able to move again in a few hours. Let him sleep it off tonight and then it’ll be like nothing ever happened. He won’t remember the before or after either, though.”

Val stopped, scratching his head in annoyance, then urged Sefekh and Khemet to sleep on a nearby sofa. Meanwhile, Captain Callum set Prince Leon on a bed so the maids could look after him.

“But this is a serious matter. Even if they didn’t know he was the prince, someone at the tavern must have—”

Val shook his head at Captain Callum. “Nah, the kid was already high before he left the castle.” He plucked a bottle of fine liquor off a shelf and held it up to me. I agreed to let him have it if he continued with his explanation. Flashing a grin, Val popped the cork.

“I was watching the castle the whole time,” he said, “but it was two men who carried the kid out, since he already couldn’t walk at that point. I followed them to that hidden tavern. They tossed him in, forced him to drink booze, threw a bunch of money around, and left him. The three of us blended into the crowd to get a good look at the place, but the kid couldn’t even move, much less talk to anyone. I’ll bet he was drugged before they dragged him out there. Thanks to him, I got to drink some prime booze at that tavern, so at least it wasn’t a total waste.”

Looking like the cat who got the cream, Val tipped the bottle to his lips.

“That means he was drugged inside the castle?” Captain Alan said.

“Doesn’t that...make things much more serious?” Arthur asked.

Stale nodded his agreement. “If all this is true, then ‘serious’ is an understatement. Someone saw fit to drug and abduct a prince, then cart him out of the castle. That’s just about as serious as it gets, especially if the perpetrator was someone from within the castle.”

He didn’t realize how right he was. Thanks to my knowledge of the game, I knew the true culprits were Prince Leon’s own brothers—Prince Erwin and Prince Homer.

During the game, the two often visited Leon after Pride had already smashed his heart to pieces. When Tiara entered Leon’s route, she happened to run into them outside Leon’s room, where she was able to learn a few details about his past from before he came to Freesia.

The young princes were jealous of Leon’s aptitude for leadership and his approval from their sovereign father. Thus, they started vicious rumors about Leon, claiming he was a playboy and philanderer. It was all lies but, in their

hatred and jealousy, they spread them far and wide. Even as the scope of the rumors broadened, Leon continued to get support from their father and the people...at least until things went so far that their father had to do something about it. That was how Leon got sent to Freesia instead of inheriting the throne. Then, on Leon's final night in Anemone, his brothers lured him into a trap by drugging him and dumping him in the tavern.

In the game, when Tiara pressed Erwin and Homer for more information, they simply said, "We made him drink a bit of alcohol, then used our slaves to carry him to the tavern."

This is a lot more than just a bit of alcohol!

I stomped on the floor. The thud drew the attention of everyone in the room.

I always knew something was strange about that! There were even scenes in the game where Leon drank wine and was just fine! Yet I don't recall any mention of him getting so trashed he couldn't even sit upright. He drank at my birthday party too!

It all made sense, now that I knew he'd been drugged. No amount of heavy drinking could account for this. It also fit with Leon's explanation of that night. *"I drank wine with my brothers and the next thing I knew, the guards found me in a local tavern."*

For one thing, he was never the type to drink that heavily, even with his brothers. His brothers claimed they drank with Leon, then left him there in his room, making it seem like Leon chose to wander down to the village all on his own. Even Leon came to believe that, at least until Tiara dug out the truth.

In the game, there was no mention of Erwin and Homer drugging their brother to set him up. On top of that, it always sounded like part of it was Leon's own drunken will, but now that I'd heard Val's explanation that whole story fell apart. I'd thought that, as his fiancé, it wouldn't take more than a warning from me to prevent him from going to the village, but that was when I really believed Leon was acting of his own volition.

But to find out it was those pesky little brothers from the game!

My hands trembled with rage as I pieced it all together.

“What is it, Elder Sister?” Stale asked. He and Arthur peered at me with concern.

Captain Callum, Captain Alan, and Vice Captain Eric all turned to watch me as well. While their worry warmed my heart, it wasn’t enough to quell my anger. From the side, liquor-laced amusement in his voice, Val called out, “Wowie, look how angry my li’l mistress is!”

I made eye contact with each of the men, then stepped forward. “Prince Erwin and Prince Homer are the culprits who lured Prince Leon into this trap.”

No one reacted at first. They merely stared at me, mouths hanging open.

“I will not allow them to go unpunished.”

My voice came out lower and quieter than even I expected. Stale and the knights stood up a bit straighter in response, resolve hardening their eyes.

“Tomorrow morning,” I said. “Once Prince Leon awakens, I’ll be the one to tell him all of this.”

My memories were a blur.

“Good morning, knights. Thank you for your sleepless watch throughout the night.”

I could picture my brothers smiling at me, one offering a wine bottle.

“Oh, that’s right, Callum. I heard a noise from the main room late last night...”

“Right, those were imperial guards. They’ve been searching everywhere, even the guest rooms, and they just came back this morning. It sounds like they’re still looking for Prince Leon.”

“Well, Arthur, Eric, I heard voices late last night. What were you talking about while you were supposed to be on duty?”

I remembered someone pouring liquid into my mouth.

“Oh... Well...”

“You joined their conversation too, Elder Sister?”

The tavern. The townsfolk's smiles.

"It was nothing. Arthur just cheered me up a bit."

Sorrow, followed by a swell of terror and despair.

"Arthur, wanna grab a drink with us when we're done with this job?"

"That sounds great. I'd love to join you."

Darkness. A man's voice.

"Mngh... Where am I?"

I groaned as consciousness returned in drips and drabs after that frenzied night. Conversation cut off abruptly around me, but I couldn't see who was speaking as I stared up at the ceiling in a daze. It seemed too difficult to try to turn my head.

"Are you awake?" There was a man at my side now. He must've been waiting for me to wake up.

"Who are you?" I asked, but I could hardly focus. My memories were hazy. I wasn't even sure I was actually conscious. The whole world was shrouded in fog.

"My name is Callum," the man said. "Do you remember what happened yesterday? Well, last night especially."

Callum spoke slowly, as though trying not to fluster me. My thoughts churned, slow and heavy. I sifted through them, trying to make sense of what little I could recall.

"Last night...I drank wine...with my brothers?"

As soon as I spoke, pain lanced through my head. I grimaced, unable to even attempt to remember any more through the headache blooming behind my eyes. A flaming-red blur among the onlookers turned meaningfully toward the others, seemingly gleaning something from my words.

"Please stay calm as you listen, Your Highness," Callum told me. "Last night, we took you into our care after you collapsed at a tavern."

As Callum slowly, methodically explained the events of the previous night, my

eyes opened wider and wider.

“My departure! Oh no! What time is it?! I have to go!”

I couldn't sort through the jumble of my thoughts. All I knew for sure was that I'd broken my promise to Pride and that I had to leave this kingdom today. I threw off the blankets covering me and lurched to my feet. Instantly, the world tilted and spun and I collapsed back onto the bed.

“Please stay put! Your guards are searching for you as we speak. Don't worry, we're going to escort you back to the castle.”

My stomach dropped as his words crystallized in my mind. “You found me?! Why was I at a tavern?!” The captain supported me so I could stand, but I had to cling to his shoulder as the panic took hold. “I'm grateful for your help, and I apologize for the trouble, but I must get back to the castle at once. I have to see my fiancé. I have to see Pride!”

“There's no need for that, Prince Leon.”

All the blood drained from my face when I heard her voice. Then she—the red blur from earlier, now solidified—stepped forward.

My eyes widened. “Pride?” I managed through trembling lips. “Why are you here? Are we not in Anemone?”

“That's exactly where we are,” she informed me. “After my warning to you that night, I grew so worried that I decided to follow you in secret. Forgive me for resorting to something so impolite.”

Pride bowed as she spoke.

I blinked, reassessing the room. There were far more people than just Pride and Callum around me. I saw other knights, including Arthur, as well as Pride's younger brother, Stale. I swallowed at the sight of him. “Even Prince Stale is here...” This was a horrible way to reunite and to meet these other knights for the first time.

“These are knights from our kingdom,” Stale explained. “They traveled with us to ensure my and Elder Sister's safety.”

I hung my head. I couldn't face Stale or any of the others, not after breaking

my promise to Pride. I'd threatened the engagement, and thereby the whole kingdom of Anemone, with my actions.

I pushed myself free of Callum's hold to sink to the floor. With no shame left to me, I bowed, my forehead pressed against the ground, and pitifully begged for them to resolve this situation without harming Anemone.

"That's not necessary, Prince Leon," Pride said. "Royalty must not bow their heads in the face of false charges."

False charges? What did she mean? I'd clearly broken my promise and ended up in a tavern surrounded by women. That was a plain fact. Maybe I didn't mean to do it, but I'd still betrayed her. Dread and terror crashed over me in waves.

I swallowed hard as I looked up at her. "Pride, I'm sorry," I said. "You warned me that night, but I still..." Then I squeezed my eyes shut, hands trembling where I clenched them on the floor.

Pride spoke slowly, as though afraid she'd frighten me away. "It's all right, Prince Leon. I understand. It wasn't your fault. I already know all the facts. You were drugged and taken to the town against your will. I also know that the rumors of your relationships with women are completely untrue. I understand everything."

I winced, and so did the knights. She knew everything. Then why would she possibly forgive me? All I could do was gawk at her wordlessly.

No matter what she said, I didn't feel innocent. I was the one who kept going to the village over and over for my own selfish reasons. She shouldn't forgive me for that.

"Prince Leon," Pride said, looking pained. "It was your younger brothers who drugged you and attempted to set you up. You don't remember anything after drinking that wine, right? We need to visit the castle together and report this to His Majesty so he can judge their crimes. I'll be there to help you."

Pain clutched my chest. My brothers? It couldn't be my brothers. The idea that they'd abandoned me... In some ways, it made sense, which only intensified the ache shooting through me.

“We can’t do that,” I said, shaking my head. “There will be no one left to inherit the throne, and they both care about the kingdom—”

“If they cared about your kingdom, they wouldn’t resort to such wicked deeds!”

Pride’s voice cracked through the room, silencing my excuses. She grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. I didn’t even have time to falter as she took charge of the conversation.

“That’s enough already! Open your eyes, Leon Adonis Coronaria! What exactly *are* your intentions?! I don’t mean what I, or your father, or your brothers want! I know that *you* have true desires of your own, deep inside your heart!”

My jade-green eyes misted over. My mouth hung open, but I couldn’t form the words. Could she possibly understand my true happiness, my true desire? But how?

She gripped my hands in hers and drew me to my feet. “I’m here for you,” she said. “So is my brother and all these knights. Even His Majesty, your father, will surely support you if you tell him what really happened.” She paused, pulling me closer. “Prince Leon, tell me, who is it that you love the most?”

My lips quivered. I couldn’t seem to form the words. “I don’t know,” I whispered—and I truly didn’t. Ever since the night when I tried to seduce her, I had no idea what to do with myself when it came to Pride. She said there was no reason for us to pretend to be in love, but something welled up within me when I looked at her. Perhaps I had no capacity to love; perhaps all I had left were the corrupt desires I’d tried to stow away all this time.

“*Hide it,*” my heart warned. Even if she didn’t love me back, I had to make myself love Pride. That was my duty, at least until Father called off the engagement.

I raised my head to look at Pride. Slowly, I reached out for the hem of her dress, then wrapped my arms around her.

“I love you, Pride Royal Ivy, and only you,” I said. I pulled my fiancée close. Then I guided her head down to rest against my shoulder. Pride let me,

wrapping her arms around me in return.

A moment passed.

“That’s enough, Leon.” She shoved me away. Her cold tone sent a chill through my body. “That isn’t where your heart truly lies.”

Pride placed her hand against my chest as though feeling the falseness in my heart. She’d seen right through me from the start. She knew I never wanted this engagement. I could feel my breath quickening, desperate to dredge up a new excuse.

“I’m not the one you love,” she said before I could speak. “You must accept your own desires.”

When I heard that, my breath stopped. Then, gritting my teeth, I shook my head. How could I possibly accept them after stuffing them down for so long? I’d always believed I had to keep anyone from ever learning of the corrupt emotions festering in my heart. I certainly couldn’t accept or validate those feelings. All I yearned for was my own pleasure—I couldn’t possibly acknowledge that. Instead, I had to bear the burden in silence to protect the townsfolk.

Pride gripped my shoulders tight, her jaw set, and gave me one final plea.

“Listen closely! Now is the only chance you have! You’re on the verge of having everything slip through your fingers. You must face your inner self!”

The tears fell before I even realized it. I shattered in her hold like a child being scolded by his mother...but Pride didn’t relent. She raised her voice and hammered her message home.

“Prince Leon, the thing that you truly love, from the very bottom of your heart...”

I blinked, wide-eyed, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her. Part of me wanted her to say it, to expose me, to give my desires form at long last. I didn’t have any hope of being accepted, but I needed to hear it all the same.

I was helpless to do anything but sit back and listen. Pride drew in a breath before finally speaking.

“...is the citizens of this kingdom, isn't it?”

I shuddered as she revealed the truth so long buried inside me. The tears spilled over, and I clutched my head. I answered in hitching wails more than words.

“No... I-I can't! I have to...leave this kingdom! I can't...let the people I love... know of such a wretched desire!”

The words flooded out like water from a burst dam. Pride stood there clasping my hands in hers, coaxing me along as the truth came out little by little.

“I'm no good,” I said.

“I didn't mean...to fall in love...with the townspeople. It's a sick desire... As a future ruler...I forced my need for attention...my narcissism...my urge to monopolize...all on the people of my—”

“Where in your heart do such desires lie?”

My heart skipped a beat when her noble voice cut me off. As bewildered as I was, a strand of hope also wormed its way in. Could I have been mistaken all this time? Pride took my cold hand in hers, sending warmth throughout my body. She looked at me with such compassion that I began to doubt the things I'd believed about myself for so long.

“There's nothing corrupt about your desire,” she said. “Who is it that you seek approval from? It's the Anemonian people, is it not?”

Snap.

My whole body suddenly felt lighter, like a heavy chain had fallen off my shoulders. In just a few sentences, Pride had given me everything I'd always yearned to hear.

She was still holding my hand, and I squeezed hers in return.

“You want the people to see you as a proper ruler,” she said, “and to become the kind of ruler they desire. What's so wrong about that?”

Snap.

Another chain suddenly fell away as goosebumps rippled across my skin.

How could this be? How could I have been wrong all this time? Was she seriously suggesting I wasn't corrupted? But no matter how hard I'd tried, I'd always failed to perform the role that everyone wanted from me and, all the while, that secret desire had eaten away at my heart.

"When have you ever shown love for yourself?" Pride said. "You've done nothing but love your people, come to know them, devoted your heart to them. Or were you simply pleased that outsiders would see you interacting with them?"

Teary-eyed, I shook my head sharply. It wasn't a show for others. In fact, I hated to imagine how it looked to everyone else. They saw me speaking with the townsfolk and reacted like I was greedy and shameful...and now Pride was saying my desire was quite the opposite. Her words and deeds had a tremendous effect on my heart. All this time, I had been in a deep despair, fearing I might never meet with my beloved people ever again. But what if...?

"What exactly are you 'monopolizing?'" she asked me. "Is it because you desire their love and no one else's? What's so wrong about that?"

My whole chest hurt as she went on. Every chain she stripped away left me lighter and lighter. My heart cried out for her to go on, to take them all away and free me at last, even if my body was torn too.

She held my face in both hands, forcing me to stare at her from up close. Slowly, my eyes were cleared and I could see her better.

"It's proof of how deeply you love your subjects! You've never stopped loving them!"

Her piercing voice brought me to tears all over again. My teeth chattered; my lips trembled. The depths of my soul stirred even more as I heard my feelings loudly approved of for the very first time.

My chains were leaving me. I could almost taste the freedom now.

"You're not monopolizing anything. You've sacrificed yourself time and time again for the sake of your people, which is why you want so badly to be loved. Even if those citizens don't love the true you, the fact that you continue to endure hardships for their sake is proof of your honor."

All this time, I'd been so concerned about ruining the alliance between Freesia and Anemone—yet I knew that if I went to Freesia with Pride, I would come to resent and fear her and forever long to flee back home. It would break my heart into pieces to leave behind the townsfolk I so loved.

No matter what Pride did—even if she turned out to be a wicked, terrible queen—I'd have to stay with her and try to protect my kingdom. She could order me to never leave, or toy with me, and I'd simply have to obey despite my deep desire to return home.

“My desires...” I gripped her hand, desperately trying to speak at last. “They're not...wicked?”

Pride smiled. Something must have changed on my face. A thread of true joy, of hope, squirmed into my chest.

“No, they're not,” she said. “In fact, you should nurture that desire. I know that your noble heart will guide you down a righteous path.”

Nurture. Noble heart. It was like she was looking directly into my soul. The final chains cracked and fell away. The weight I'd carried for so long evaporated like smoke.

I pulled her close as the tears returned. Pride seemed surprised at first, but I just tightened my hold, clinging fiercely to her. She leaned her weight against me and I pressed my face against her shoulder, dampening her dress with my tears. I could hear the soft rustle of fabric through my sobs.

“I don't...want to leave Anemone!” The truth burst out of me at last.

Muffled by Pride's shoulder, my anguished wails echoed through the room. Pride stiffened in my hold, and I rushed to continue.

“Our trade markets are on the right course. We're going to gather even more products, and then the kingdom will be prosperous. All the kids in town told me they want to be traders someday, traders who sell wares from all around the world!”

I understand now. The surge of emotions I felt when I met the townsfolk were my own happiness, my joy, my wonder, my salvation, my enjoyment...my love. Those emotions I felt when my heart let out its very first cry were with me all

along.

I raised my voice, barreling on. “Just a month ago, a farmer family outside of town smiled and told me that their latest crops had come in wonderfully! They told me that they wanted me to visit them someday and try their harvest!”

I wanted to see that harvest. I wanted to ensure that family’s happy, peaceful future. I wanted to make all their dreams and desires come true, to fill their lives with more joy than ever. I wanted them to feel blessed that they were born in Anemone. That was why I wanted to stay here. Even if I never became king, I wanted to live among my people. That was my true desire.

My love would not be held back anymore.

“The last time I went into town for an observation, a woman let me hold her baby,” I said. “She...she’d named him after me! She told me she hoped he grew up to be a kind person like me.”

My fingers tensed against Pride, and I had to resist the urge to dig in. All this time, I’d put up a front for her, pretended at love, but what I admitted now was earnest, passionate love torn right from the depths of my soul.

“Even after the rumors about me spread through town, they...they smiled at me like always and said they still believed in me. I love this kingdom! Nothing can ever replace it!”

I shouted those final declarations, the words scratching at my throat. My brothers might have spread all those nasty rumors, but I knew what I said was true. The people here loved, admired, trusted me—and I felt the same about them.

The thing most precious to me, the thing that I love almost more than I can bear, is the kingdom of Anemone and its people. Just as no one can replace a loved one, no one can ever replace the Anemonian people in my heart. No matter what kinds of amazing kingdoms might exist out there, this is the one I want. I’ll stay here until I perish. I’ll live on this soil and die for my land.

Pride held me to her chest as I calmed, but it took a while for the crying to taper off. I muttered against her, softer declarations like “I love them” and “I don’t want to leave them.”

“That is your truth,” she replied.

She hugged me, setting her face against my shoulder. When she breathed in, it was like she inhaled my very essence, like she knew things about me even I didn’t even know.

“Prince Leon, I...”

Pride raised her voice so everyone in the room could hear, not just me. I felt her take a deep breath before she slowly extricated herself from my arms. Then she stared at me meaningfully with those purple eyes of hers.

“I came here so that you could take everything back.”

Everything. I blinked, finally understanding it all. But she was so enigmatic, I couldn’t anticipate her next steps. I felt like I was staring at an angel, a savior.

“Let’s go together,” she told me. “We’ll be right there with you. If you choose, by your own will, to take my hand...”

She stood up and reached out for me. I raised my tear-stained face to peer at her and our eyes locked.

“I promise to make you happy!” she declared for everyone in the room to hear.

One last tear slipped down my face. Then my crying was over, and hope rushed in. I stared into her eyes. This time, I was the one reaching for her. My will, my desires, rushed to the surface, but for the first time in my life, I didn’t feel ashamed. I felt determined.

“Thank you for all the care you’ve shown my dear fiancé.”

I kept my voice cheerful as, with a distinct, cutting undertone, I addressed the second-born and third-born princes of this kingdom. All the blood drained from Erwin and Homer’s faces.

I had to stay the course and face them down for Leon’s sake. In ORL, if Leon wasn’t part of Tiara’s route, he willingly gave up his position as prince consort to her love interest of choice and returned to Anemone. However, if you played Leon’s route, he ended up uniting the two kingdoms and helping to lead them

into a peaceful future thanks to his position as prince consort. Knowing the depth of Leon's love for his kingdom during his route in the game, I couldn't possibly tear him away from this place. Instead, I had to confront his evil younger brothers so Leon could find his true happiness.

After Leon broke down and confessed, I knew we had to head for the castle. Stale could teleport Leon to keep his identity hidden. Of course, Leon would also have to keep Stale's special power a secret.

The moment we arrived at the castle, we asked to see the king. Attendants showed us to a waiting room. Once His Majesty agreed to see us, I requested Prince Erwin and Prince Homer as well. The king seemed reluctant, but I threw around my weight as Mother's proxy. In that role, I could act on the queen's behalf. My words carried the weight of a Freesian monarch making an official directive. Although initially taken aback, he eventually agreed to bring in his other sons as well.

When they arrived, I saw that the two boys shared the same indigo hair as their father. It was a slightly different shade than Prince Leon's, though they all had those bright jade eyes. Erwin, the second-born prince, grew his hair out past his ears. At first glance, he was a beautiful boy with a mature face, but he wore many trinkets on his ears, neck, and wrists. Homer, on the other hand, wore very few accessories, just like Prince Leon, and his hair was cut short. His androgynous clothing clashed with his masculine facial features.

I seated myself on a sofa once the two boys joined us, then smiled politely at His Majesty.

"Right now, Your Majesty, Prince Leon has something he'd like to share with you."

When I met Leon's eyes, he jerked and stood up straighter. His brothers whispered a panicked "B-Big Brother?!" But Prince Leon had made up his mind. He ignored them, looking his father straight in the eye. His Majesty raised his eyebrows as he met his son's steady gaze.

"Father," Prince Leon said. "Last night, Pride came to my rescue in a local tavern. Erwin and Homer had visited my room earlier in order to entrap me by presenting me with drugged wine. They then took me to the tavern and left me

there.”

The king’s eyes went wide, his face draining of color as his jaw dropped. Erwin and Homer hastened to explain, shouting over each other in their frantic rush to make excuses, but he didn’t seem to hear them.

“Wait just a moment, Big Brother! You have the wrong idea!”

“Homer is right! We *did* enjoy some wine with Big Brother last night because we were just so sad to say goodbye, but he quickly became drunk, and so we...”

The excuses piled up. In their version of the night’s events, all three brothers drank wine together, but Prince Leon got drunk and told them to leave, claiming he remembered something urgent he needed to do. It was the same story that Leon first told during the game. That version of Leon always believed that he’d left to visit the village of his own free will. He even thought his brothers had helped him with his selfish desire. He always blamed himself and never his brothers. He never even mentioned his brothers’ involvement at all until his romance with Tiara progressed, but even then he painted it as his own personal betrayal of his kingdom.

As I now knew, that wasn’t the truth, but those selfish younger brothers of his weren’t going to confess to their grave crimes. Besides, these two side characters had other reasons for visiting Leon so often in the game, even after he went to Freesia, and for spinning such a story to Tiara...

“In any case, this is all a big misunderstanding,” Erwin insisted. “Big Brother was drunk last night and it must be affecting his memories today. There’s no proof that we drugged him...”

Erwin was shouting, and Homer, the third-born prince, nodded to corroborate the denials. They probably believed they’d gotten away with it. I had to imagine they’d disposed of the drugged wine by now. The king, meanwhile, was staring at the floor, so I couldn’t read his expression.

“Some of Pride’s subordinates saw me being taken out of the castle last night,” Prince Leon said. “After rescuing me from the tavern and looking after me, they concluded that I’d been drugged.”

Prince Leon’s retelling of the facts was decisive.

“Th-there’s no proof of anything like that!” Erwin said, scowling. “These are entirely one-sided claims by Princess Pride—no, by the kingdom of Freesia!”

So, Erwin chose to stand his ground. I became more and more disgusted with him and Homer. Stale glared coldly at the younger princes. One of the knights at my back even snorted softly as the excuses kept coming.

Prince Leon’s younger brothers were absolutely desperate to assert their innocence. During Leon’s route in the game, there were times when their foolishness was on full display, so this reaction wasn’t completely surprising to me. However, denying their crimes to an ally like Freesia, and to a proxy of the queen no less, was like a declaration of war. I had to keep my cool and avoid flying into a rage, like I knew the wicked Queen Pride from the game would have done. The peace of both kingdoms depended on how things went from here.

But Erwin prattled on, unaware of the severity of his words. Homer cried out in agreement each time, equally oblivious.

“Freesia is attempting to win over Big Brother!” Erwin claimed. “They’re framing Homer and me, making up some crazy story, setting up an excuse to declare war on our kingdom! I’m sure of it!”

If anyone’s mounting excuses for a declaration of war, it’s you two! If I’d wanted a war, I could have just left Prince Leon in that tavern and let the imperial guards catch him red-handed.

I was more shocked than upset, but I gritted my teeth to keep my expression as neutral as possible.

“Isn’t it a bit *too* convenient that they just so happened to find Big Brother?!” Erwin went on. “Guards from all around the kingdom spent the entire night looking for him. Freesia must have abducted him somehow or convinced him to help set up this entire thi—”

Bang!

A heavy thud silenced the simpering excuses as the king slammed his fist against the table. Everyone’s heads whipped toward His Majesty.

“Erwin! Homer!”

He growled their names through clenched teeth. Their shoulders trembled.

“I thought I warned you! ‘Now is the time to reflect on your own mistakes.’”

His Majesty’s face burned red with fury. He glared at his youngest sons so fiercely that the knights and even Prince Leon gaped on with shock, looking back and forth. I let a quiet breath escape me. No one else dared speak in the face of the king’s potent anger. To be fair, he was hardly being unreasonable—and it seemed he was upset about more than the lies, insults, and plots against Prince Leon.

The king rose and offered me a formal apology. Even if I was acting on behalf of my mother, this was quite the display. The king was offering a regal bow to someone below his rank. All I could do was accept the apology with grace. After all, his sons were trying to frame me for multiple crimes and pit our whole country against him.

When the king raised his head again, he rounded on his younger sons.

“I proclaim, by the title of Anemonian king: Erwin Adonis Coronaria. Homer Adonis Coronaria. I hereby strip you of all the rights of royalty.”

The king’s voice boomed through the chamber. Even the palace guards shifted from foot to foot. Erwin and Homer quivered, their mouths flapping open and closed as if to argue. This time, however, they had no excuses to offer.

“You are to choose,” the king said. “Begin new lives as slaves in this kingdom, or become citizens of a distant land.”

Slavery or exile. These were the choices the boys faced for sullyng the royal family’s reputation. Before they could choose, the king ordered his guards to take the boys away.

Erwin and Homer wailed in protest as they knelt.

“Let go of me!”

“Don’t you have any manners?!”

The guards didn’t respond, so the boys angrily tried pleading with the king instead.

“If not Homer or *me*, then who will inherit the throne?!” Erwin screeched. Although he’d mentioned them both, he clearly had an idea of who should rule.

I sighed and tuned out their antics. *That’s enough of this nonsense. I’ll deal with them later.*

“Your Majesty,” I began.

The king turned and met my eyes. He tried to remain dignified, but exhaustion crept in at the corners of his eyes. Sentencing his own sons was no trivial matter, so I had to hand it to him.

“If I’m incorrect in what I’m about to say, please tell me so,” I said, just to be safe. Blinking his wide eyes, he nodded.

“I’ve had a premonition. Your Majesty, there’s something you wish to discuss with me... No, with my mother. Is that correct?”

The king’s eyebrows quirked upward. He swallowed hard and started to speak, but I raised my hand to stop him. “If I’m correct, then there’s no need to respond.” I had him wait for me to continue instead. The younger brothers stared at me as well, taken aback by my statements.

“I believe you wish to consult with her to break off my engagement to Prince Leon Adonis Coronaria.”

Soft murmurs and some audible gulps rippled through the room, but the king held my gaze, confirming my prediction.

“I can’t believe it,” Stale whispered. I couldn’t blame anyone for being shocked. Of the two of us, Prince Leon was of lower status. Unlike him, I was the established heir to my kingdom’s throne. Additionally, Freesia was larger than Anemone in size, military endeavors, and everything else. To have Prince Leon of Anemone request that the engagement be called off was more than a simple slight. It was an international incident. But the king had a very good reason for taking such drastic action.

“Furthermore, I believe you intend to name Prince Leon as heir to the throne.”

The color in Prince Leon’s face changed. His expression went blank as he

looked with wavering eyes from me to the king.

Neither he nor the king were the first to voice their shock, however.

“How could you possibly know that?!” Homer cried through chattering teeth. He struggled against the guard restraining him. At his side, Erwin narrowed his eyes at me, baring his own teeth in a grimace.

The king swallowed before he attempted to respond. “Princess Pride, I must offer my—”

“Please wait just a moment. I ask that you first allow me to finish.” No matter how rude it seemed to cut him off, I needed to make the situation absolutely clear before it went any further. He owed me no apology.

I searched for Stale, Arthur, and the knights. They watched over me diligently, though it appeared they wanted to speak up as well despite their sealed lips. I offered them a smile of gratitude for their steadfastness. *It’s going to be okay. I made this decision from the start.*

I drew a deep breath. With my chin held high and my chest puffed out, I met the king’s eyes and spoke.

“As the queen’s proxy, I offer my mother’s official permission to end my engagement to Prince Leon.”

Not even Tiara, this world’s protagonist, was capable of doing this. Right now, the only person who could bring Prince Leon and his kingdom happiness...was me.

“I’ve come here on behalf of my kingdom to request the breaking of my engagement to Prince Leon Adonis Coronaria.”

A chill ran through the room. Silence hung so heavily, I was sure I’d hear even the slightest sound of movement. The king’s mouth parted softly, but he did not yet speak. Prince Leon blinked rapidly, his eyes wide as saucers, as though he couldn’t believe what I’d just said. His fingers trembled; his face twitched.

“You fool!” Erwin shouted, his voice ragged and face blotchy with rage. “Big Brother will make a perfect ruler! There’s no reason for Freesia to want to end the engagement!”

Homer piped up to agree, glaring at Prince Leon. “That’s exactly right!”

“I have my own reasons,” I told them. “A marriage between the two of us is no longer necessary.”

I offered my hand to Prince Leon and he took it, helping me to my feet even though he still seemed confused about what was unfolding around him.

“Prince Leon served flawlessly as my fiancé. He was genuinely interested in my kingdom’s culture and people. We were able to form a close bond in a short time. Mother, Father, the Freesian people, the castle servants, and everyone else saw him as a wonderful man to be my betrothed.”

Many people had witnessed the growing bond between me and Prince Leon. We’d had to show the Freesian people the strength of our union so that no one would interpret any discord between us.

“Our engagement was formed to strengthen the relationship between our kingdoms, as well as display that strength to neighboring lands. The kingdom of Anemone is very important to us. Our trade relationship is also vital.”

Then I gripped Prince Leon’s hand to steady him and met his eyes, offering what comfort I could. His whole world was turning upside down before his eyes.

“I’ve had a vision,” I went on. “It’s a glimpse of what the future holds for this kingdom without Prince Leon.”

I closed my eyes to shut out the gazes of everyone else in the room so as not to falter. I knew from ORL how things would turn out here. In two years’ time, Anemone would be a completely changed kingdom.

When I opened my eyes, I looked right at Leon. Uncertainty flickered in his gaze, but I did not relent.

“Prince Leon, this kingdom needs you.”

His face twitched again as he desperately forced his calm, seemingly holding back tears.

“If you truly become a leader who, like me, loves the people of his kingdom dearly, then that makes our relationship one of ‘sworn friends.’ Meaning we can form a strong bond without having to wed.”

“Sworn friends...” He repeated my words as though struggling to understand.

“That’s right. As long as our relationship is a strong one, there can be no greater proof of the alliance between our two lands.”

“That’s complete nonsense!” Erwin shrieked, his molars audibly clacking together.

I glared over my shoulder at him. “Perhaps you’re right,” I replied, then faced the king. “In that case, let us enact a joint treaty in place of my engagement to Prince Leon. Royal family members from each of our kingdoms shall visit each other’s country at regular intervals for a friendly exchange of cultures. Neither kingdom will be higher in status. If I am the one to visit Anemone and Prince Leon visits Freesia, it will likely serve as a good example for nearby countries as well. How does that sound to you?”

The king nodded his assent, although he asked, “Is that all you’d ask of us?” His Majesty must have prepared even more apology gifts and treaties to offer in exchange for the cancellation of our engagement, but there was no need for any of that.

“Of course,” I said. “Anemone and Freesia have had a long relationship. Ending a *simple* engagement on mutual terms alone isn’t something that calls for repayment or apologies. If we receive any more in the deal, it will indicate to other kingdoms that our relationship isn’t equal, making any future treaty pointless.”

I stressed the word “simple” even though that wasn’t quite true. Everyone in the room knew it—I could hear their gulps from here. An engagement between royalty was hardly different from an actual marriage. The higher-ranking party could break off the engagement and cast it as a matter of incompatibility, but if it went the opposite way, it was a display of disrespect and a stain on the name of the rejected party. The end of our engagement was anything but “simple.”

“What my kingdom seeks from Anemone is a stabilization of the equal, allied relationship that we’ve always maintained,” I said. “We must not let an engagement destroy that relationship. As crown princess, I swear to work hard to form a sworn friendship with Prince Leon that will benefit both our kingdoms!”

I squeezed Prince Leon's hand. This time, he squeezed mine back.

"I'll grant your wish," he said. "I promise you."

It was only two sentences, but I could sense Prince Leon's determination in those words. I looked up and saw real strength in his gaze.

The king loudly slumped down on the sofa behind him as though his legs had suddenly given out.

"Prepare the treaty at once," he ordered.

His seneschal, who'd been standing quietly in a corner, acquiesced and rushed to obey. That was step one of drawing up the treaty done.

Next, the king signaled to his guards to take Erwin and Homer away for good. The boys wriggled and fought, but they had no hope against the palace guards.

"Look at us, Big Brother! No, Leon!" Erwin cried as the guards dragged him off. With his arms pinned by the guards, he could only twist his upper body and howl. He spewed a rapid stream of insults, getting in a few final jabs before he was taken away.

"How can a doll with no will of his own be a king?!" he spat. "You can say whatever you want to sound tough, but there's nothing inside you at all! A doll who couldn't even see through Homer and me could *never* rule the kingdom! It won't take more than a few years for everything to fall apart here. When that happens, you'll know I would have made a better king. I'm much better suited than a creepy bastard who wants the townsfolk to love him just so he can feel better about—"

"SILENCE!"

My furious shout cracked loud and shrill across the room. Erwin and all the guards froze. *I just can't help it. As fellow royalty, this shameful display infuriates me to my core.*

Releasing Prince Leon's hand, I muttered to the king, "Excuse my rudeness, Your Majesty." Then I strode up to Erwin and Homer, those petulant children. The exquisite rug at my feet muffled the sound of my approach. Without it, the sound of my heavy steps surely would have clacked loud on the floor. I couldn't

stop glaring at the two brothers, who watched me in sullen silence.

“Listen carefully,” I said. “Prince Leon is a proud man who will make a fine king. He isn’t a doll. He loves the Anemonian people more than he loves himself. He dedicates his life to becoming the kind of king everyone wants him to be. He’s a wonderful person.”

Erwin and Homer went pale before me. My eyes must have been blazing with fury.

“You *dare* say it won’t take more than a few years for everything to fall apart here?”

The tyrannical queen inside me finally reared her ugly head. I wanted to snarl at them. I raised my voice, turning a blank and fearsome gaze on them as I tried to pound each word into their thick skulls. Even the guards carrying them froze beneath my stare.

“That future I saw in my vision was the Anemone ruled by you, not Prince Leon. Under your combined reign, the people of your kingdom became impoverished and had no choice but to leave. Trade declined. Both the kingdom and the monarchy decayed in a way that would make your current luxurious lifestyle impossible.”

I didn’t need to say all this. I didn’t need to keep lashing out at them. But I just couldn’t help it when I saw them still trying to hurt Prince Leon.

From behind me, Stale whispered, “Elder Sister...?”

“And then, as soon as you’d ruined the kingdom, you came to Prince Leon in my kingdom to seek his help.”

“*We want you to come back. We can’t fix things on our own.*” That was what these boys eventually said in the game, but the Erwin and Homer before me looked like they couldn’t believe they’d ever come crawling back seeking Prince Leon’s help.

However, by the start of the game’s story, they were already making regular visits to Freesia—or, more specifically, to Leon. The public story was that Leon had fallen ill, but in truth, Leon’s heartbreak and despair kept him from leaving the castle. His brothers only visited him to beg him to return to Anemone and

fix things for them, even after they'd schemed to steal the throne from Leon in the first place.

The two went to Freesia many times to plead with Leon, which was torture for the depressed ex-prince, who was forced to stay there for the sake of the alliance. "Please come back. You have to be the one to fix things." Finally, they even said, "Do you even care about the Anemonian people at all?!" At that point, Leon flew into a rage, chasing them away. Afterward, he clung to Tiara and wept in one of the most heartbreaking scenes in the game.

Erwin and Homer even attempted to manipulate Tiara around halfway through the game, telling her with feigned regret, "Big Brother was *supposed* to be the ruler of our kingdom." In truth, they always envied their older brother for this, among other things, such as his ability to overcome obstacles while retaining his noble bearing. They felt inferior with the whole kingdom waiting for Leon to take over the throne. That was what had started them down their dark path, a path that resulted in the very rumors that got Leon shipped off to Freesia to marry Pride.

Everything changed after Leon's official engagement was announced. When Leon visited Freesia, the king found out that his two youngest sons had been the ones spreading those rumors all those years. The boys' mother, the queen, overheard them celebrating the success of their plan while Leon and the king attended Pride's birthday party. When His Majesty returned home before Leon, the queen told him what she'd learned. As a result, he summoned Erwin and Homer and berated them for their disgraceful actions. He announced that Leon would inherit the throne after all, warning Erwin and Homer that it was time to "reflect on their mistakes." This only left the boys more determined to steal the throne permanently, which is why they got Leon drunk and left him at the tavern that night. This alone would have been evil enough, yet they went even further than that...

"What the hell did you see in your visions?!" Erwin exclaimed.

He gaped at me as though seeing a monster. Fear shot through his eyes.

I tried to keep my face and voice neutral as I replied, "I saw many things. Many townsfolk and guards witnessed Prince Leon's drunken state at that

tavern. As a result, you two became the monarchs. Even when Prince Leon became prince consort in Freesia, he continued to long for the citizens of Anemone. When His Majesty learned of your wrongdoings, he revealed that Prince Leon would become the heir to the throne. I believe that part happened a few days ago.”

This time, they just blinked at me in silence. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me. I heard a clatter; the king must have stood up again.

“Remember this, you two.”

My anger rose to the surface as I formed my parting words. The evil Queen Pride who lurked within yearned to lash out at these boys, but I forced her—and the smirk forming on my lips—down with sheer effort.

“No matter what your crimes may be, I will never allow you to cause more harm to this kingdom, or to Prince Leon, as my sworn friend.”

They swallowed hard, sweat dotting their brows and dripping down their necks. They knew I wasn’t done yet.

“Should you disobey that order, you will become enemies of the woman known as Pride Royal Ivy. I will then personally carry out your punishment.”

All they had to do was look into my eyes to see that these were not empty threats. Homer nodded frantically. Erwin still managed to glare, but defeat already soured his haughty expression.

“The wench is just lucky that women take the throne in her country,” Erwin said. The guard behind him gave him a sharp jerk for that.

“You two?” I went on. “You’re too pathetic and wretched to be considered royalty.”

Leon’s state of depression at the start of the game wasn’t caused by being forced out of his kingdom or by losing the trust of his father and the Anemonian people.

Rather, he’d witnessed Pride killing every last one of the people in that same tavern in which he was found.

Queen Pride learned that Leon had been found drunk in a tavern on the very

morning he was supposed to arrive in Freesia. In response, she declared everyone in that tavern criminals and demanded Anemone turn them over to her custody. If the kingdom refused, she threatened to call off the engagement and dispatch her knights in retribution.

Once she received the Anemonian townsfolk, Pride made Leon watch as she massacred them. Leon, having witnessed so much death due to his personal mistakes, couldn't bear any more. Corruption overcame his heart. He believed that anyone close to him would also be killed, hurt, or have their happiness stolen away, and so he began to fear any human interaction at all.

Regardless of which route Tiara ended up on in the game, Leon never failed to take control of the kingdom of Anemone in the end. When the player finished a route other than Leon's, Tiara narrated the story of Leon replacing Erwin as king, allowing Anemone to flourish again. He even managed to restore trade. Erwin and Homer always welcomed Leon back to the kingdom, shoving all their responsibilities onto him as they feigned joy at having their brother home again.

In Leon's route, his brothers perished. However, it wasn't Leon getting his revenge. Instead, Pride casually murdered them for her own amusement. Though Leon grieved for his brothers, many ORL players despised Erwin and Homer, who were only second to Pride in earning fans' ire. Some people even played Leon's route over and over again simply to watch the brothers get their just deserts.

Standing here now, it was hard to claim I didn't sympathize with those fans. Strangely enough, when I'd played the game in my past life, I didn't really think much of the whole thing. I wrote off Erwin and Homer as awful brothers who felt no remorse. I thought that Anemone didn't really need to turn over all those innocent people to Pride.

In any case, once Leon moved permanently to Freesia in the game, his father suddenly fell ill and passed away, leaving Erwin and Homer to inherit the throne. Leon had to deal with the fallout from all their actions, while they feigned innocence in the whole ordeal. There were even scenes of Erwin and Homer alone saying things like, "Yes, we can definitely persuade that little girl of whatever we want," and "I've had enough of all this work to be king. Let's just make Leon do it all. I'm sure he'll say yes."

Once they'd revealed Leon's past and their own sins to Tiara, they begged her, saying, "Please, Anemone needs Big Brother's help! We lost our father and there's nothing more we can do for this kingdom on our own!" so she would persuade Leon to return. They even kidnapped Tiara and threatened Leon so he would return to Anemone.

In one scene, Leon and Tiara fled to the local village. Pride forced the Anemonian king and his seneschal to search for them, promising to make Leon return if they did. These were rulers of an entire country, yet she treated them no differently than she treated Val or the man with the chains—simple servants to do her bidding. After declaring Erwin and Homer "useless rulers," Pride shot them dead right in front of Leon.

These were the brothers who framed Leon, caused his downfall, and acted as enemies against him...but Leon still cradled their dead bodies against his chest and swore to fight back against the fearsome Pride. That was how much he loved them.

However, that wasn't enough for me to forgive Erwin and Homer in the present. As royalty, they couldn't go unpunished for their reckless actions.

"Erwin, formerly the second-born prince, and Homer, formerly the third-born prince, what was it you hoped to do after gaining control of the kingdom?"

They stared, unblinking, without responding. It was like their actions were only just sinking in. In the game, once they gained control of the kingdom, they used their powers to live lives of luxury. They neglected duties such as maintaining relationships with other kingdoms or caring for their people. As a result, Anemone fell into ruin.

"If the first thing that comes to your minds isn't the image of your people, then that says it all," I said. "You have no right to deny someone with as noble a heart as Prince Leon."

There were more things I wanted to say, and more future reckless deeds of theirs that I wanted to reveal, but I'd already exposed too many "premonitions" of the future that I should have kept to myself. It was dangerous to keep revealing my knowledge.

Instead, I put my back to the boys and faced the king, apologizing for my

outburst as I steadied my shaking fists. Then I settled down on the sofa. The guards, seeing I was done, started to drag Erwin and Homer away.

“Are you all right, Elder Sister?” Stale whispered, and his kindness seeped into my body. I smiled and told him I was fine.

“Pride...”

Prince Leon stood over me, looking flabbergasted. I worried that he was angry about all that I’d revealed—the decline of the kingdom, his brothers’ terrible rule... Maybe I should have held back some, even if they *were* criminals, but I was just so angry. I’d flown completely off the handle. *What if my words made him turn against me or Freesia as a whole?*

“Thank you!” The words burst out of him and he dropped to wrap me in his arms. Caught off guard by the embrace, I fell against his chest.

I didn’t understand why he was thanking me—or why he was hugging me, for that matter. He squeezed me tightly to him, burying his face against my shoulder. Wetness soaked into my clothing as his emotions overflowed. What sort of face was he making? Whatever his expression, his feelings were utterly genuine. It was all part of the process.



I returned the embrace, rubbing his back in small, soothing circles. I could feel his warmth.

“Prince Leon,” I said, “be proud of yourself. Embrace your love for your people.”

He nodded against my shoulder, but his soft crying had turned into sobbing.

“Your heart, and this kingdom you love, are both beautiful.”

I could only imagine how much pain I’d caused him over the past few days. Tormented by his love for his kingdom, he’d kept those emotions inside all this time. He’d acted like the perfect prince for the outside world, crushed all the while under his love for his people.

I knew his pain the moment he arrived in Freesia. His charming words, his seductive moves—all of it was a front. I’d seen through it immediately, down to the suffering going on beneath the surface. During the three days we spent together in Freesia, I’d truly longed to weep for him. Now I could finally see him happy and return him to his rightful place in Anemone. I was overjoyed to give him that.

“Prince Leon Adonis Coronaria,” I said, drawing on the vows I remembered from my past life in a different world. “Do you promise to love the people of your kingdom, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, to adore and protect them, and to dedicate yourself to improving their lives?”

He clutched me tighter, and I felt the strength of his resolve as he struggled to speak through sobs.

“I do!” he finally managed.

Before our very eyes, the prince who adored his kingdom above all else made this vow with love.

“Please add your signatures to the document once you’ve confirmed its content.”

We both read over the parchment. It was authentic and comprehensive. Stale gave me a nod and handed me a pen. The document detailed the termination of my engagement to Prince Leon, plus a treaty for continuous visits to each

other's kingdoms. When I signed my name as the queen's proxy, my engagement to Prince Leon would officially end.

I accepted the pen from Stale. The knights and guards watching over us gulped as they watched my every move, but I didn't hesitate to sign the new agreement.

There it was: *Pride Royal Ivy*. The name of my kingdom's firstborn princess.

His Majesty signed next, glancing up at his son as he did. Prince Leon's eyes were still swollen from crying, his face tinged red as he stared at me in a daze.

"Prince Leon, I trust that our relationship will continue to be friendly in the future," I said with a smile.

He would be more than my ally—he'd be my sworn friend. We would visit each other's kingdoms to strengthen that bond. Despite his shock, Prince Leon smiled back. He faced me with a new resolve at the prospect of this brighter future for both of us.

"I will now return to my homeland to inform Mother of today's events," I announced.

I stood and Stale rolled up the parchment with the signatures. I had to show the treaty to Mother and Father as soon as I could.

"You're leaving already?" Prince Leon said. He seemed to want me to stay, but I had to insist on going while I still had a chance to make it back to Freesia in the same day. I also didn't want to overstay my welcome in the castle after upending everything here so dramatically.

Just then, His Majesty rose to his feet. "Princess Pride, may I ask you one more thing?" He bore a stern expression that reminded me of my own father.

"Of course," I said, standing a little taller.

"You knew about the downfall of this kingdom, the foolish actions of Erwin and Homer, and even Leon's innocence," he said. "Why did you return Leon to the kingdom without asking for anything in return? Had you kept your engagement, Freesia could easily have absorbed our kingdom once it fell into ruin. I apologize for asking this only after you've already signed the treaty, but I

must know.”

I smiled at the king. The answer was simple.

“You’re our ally and I care about your kingdom. It’s nothing more than that.”

The king stiffened for a moment, then his shoulders finally relaxed. “I’m grateful for your help,” he said quietly, eyes softening. He dipped his head in acknowledgment, and I returned the gesture.

As our eyes met, I spoke up to ask him for one more favor. When he agreed, I stepped to his side so His Majesty could see Stale and the knights behind me.

“These people have accompanied me ever since I left my kingdom,” I told him. “They helped keep Prince Leon safe. They are my younger brother and a squadron of knights. I ask that you please shake their hands and greet each of them.”

“Of course,” the king replied with a smile.

He stepped forward, and Prince Leon followed suit. Stale and the bewildered knights stood up a bit straighter when the royalty of Anemone approached them, but graciously accepted the handshakes and greetings.

“I look forward to working with you as allies,” Stale said as he shook both their hands with a smile.

Captain Callum was next. He looked nervous as he took the hands of the king and prince, bowing politely. Prince Leon thanked him for all his help, to which Captain Callum replied, “It was no trouble at all.”

Even Captain Alan seemed intimidated. Vice Captain Eric answered His Majesty’s handshake with two firm hands, shyly telling him that it was an honor to help. Once they’d left him, Vice Captain Eric flashed me a smile. His cheeks were red, but he nodded at me.

Finally, Arthur stepped forward to shake the king’s hand, though he was already shriveled with fear. He took His Majesty’s hand...and froze.

It wasn’t like before. The king seemed as baffled as Arthur, though he managed to greet him as he did the other knights. Arthur then moved on to shake Prince Leon’s hand. The prince’s smile relaxed him. Arthur even returned

the gesture before looking over at me. I nodded at his silent question. Prince Leon, meanwhile, shot us both an inquisitive gaze. Arthur looked down at his hands, then back up at the king.

Arthur had cured the king's mysterious illness.

The game's story began two years from now. By that point, the king had already passed away from a sudden illness, leaving Leon's brothers in charge. His death occurred just after he sent Prince Leon to Freesia, before he could rehabilitate his youngest sons or name a new successor. But in this world, things wouldn't turn out that way. There was no reason for it. Here, Prince Leon would be a wonderful king and his father would live a long and healthy life, able to pass his knowledge down to his son.

With just a brief handshake, Arthur used his special power to cure diseases. He'd also healed Maria's strange illness, which had left her trapped in sleep for many years. Arthur said neither party noticed when he cured a simple illness, but he *could* feel a more serious one. The king's disease must have been grave for Arthur to sense it so strongly. What Arthur had done was truly an incredible feat.

After the introductions, Anemone saw us off. Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric hopped into the driver's seat of the carriage, while Captain Callum and Arthur followed Stale and me.

"Thank you for everything you've done for us," the Anemonian queen said. "I offer you my sincerest apologies for this entire ordeal."

She shook my and Stale's hands. Meeting her at last, I could see where Prince Leon got his looks. She had long blue hair and stunning eyes that stayed fixed on us as she expressed her gratitude.

I bid His Majesty one last farewell. He told me that he and Prince Leon would visit our kingdom soon to greet and apologize to my parents.

"I'll be awaiting your visit. I intend to return to Anemone soon as well," I replied, and the king's regal expression softened.

Prince Leon spoke up. "P-Princess Pride."

"You can call me Pride just like always, Prince Leon. We're sworn friends, after

all.”

A small, bashful smile spread across his face. A distant sadness lingered in his eyes. “In that case, please call me Leon.” He took my hand in his. Speaking to each other like this, without frills or formality, sealed our bond as friends. A *wonderful change*, I thought.

“Very well, Leon. I look forward to seeing you again.”

“Again?” he parroted.

“Yes. I’ll see you again.” We’d be visiting each other’s kingdoms more often now as we grew as successors to our respective thrones, only strengthening our friendship.

“Again...” Leon whispered once more...then a wide grin split his face.

Heat snuck into my face at the sight of his dazzling smile. I hadn’t yet witnessed a genuine smile from him, but it was far more charming than all the false ones had been. I froze before it, especially when Leon raised my hand and pressed his lips to the back in a kiss.

“Yes, I’ll see you again,” he murmured happily. My heart raced as electricity shot through my trembling body. His jade eyes pulled me in. “Pride, as your former fiancé, I’d like to say one thing out of turn. Will you let me?”

“Yes, go ahead.” I was too charmed to refuse. My mind was blank.

Leon led me to the carriage by the hand—the one he’d kissed. Captain Callum opened the door for me, with Stale and Arthur standing behind Leon and I. Leon took my shoulders to stop me, beckoning for Arthur and Stale to board the carriage first. They hesitated before agreeing.

Finally, Leon helped me step up onto the carriage while he held my hand. The height of the carriage meant that I was taller than Leon in this position and had to bend over to look into his eyes.

“Pride,” he said gently as we stood face-to-face. “I’ll never forget what you did for me. If you... If Freesia is ever in need of anything, then Anemone—then I—will come to your aid, whatever the cost may be.”

He reached out to tuck my hair behind my ear, gentle fingers brushing against

my cheek. My body flushed with heat all over again.

“Let us meet again,” he said. “I’ll come to see you as many times as needed. I’ll always be waiting for your next visit from here in this kingdom that I love.”

He combed through my hair with his fingers, sounding truly crestfallen at the idea of our parting.

“Farewell, my beloved fiancée.”

Leon put one foot on the step up into the carriage, then pulled himself up by holding onto the door. My eyes went wide as I looked up at him, startled. He placed his hand on my cheek. His luminescent eyes held me captive. I stood stock-still as Leon’s beautiful face approached mine...

...and he kissed the corner of my mouth.

It was *very* close to my lips. He likely would have landed on them if I’d moved my head even slightly. His soft, wet lips had tugged on the skin ever so slightly. When he pulled away, there was a soft *smooch*—a sound I’d only ever heard in games from my past life. He drew back, but his captivating eyes remained fixed on me.

“Farewell, my first love.”

Slam!

Leon closed the door as he stepped away from the carriage. The sudden force, so close to my face, sent me falling to the floor.

“Y-Your Highness!”

“Elder Sister!”

Arthur and Stale rushed to my aid, but their faces were burning red. I honestly couldn’t say I was faring much better. I felt like steam had to be coming out of my collar after that display from Leon. My whole brain was stuck just churning over his words.

First love?! Since when?! Pride’s his first love?! I’m his first love?!

The carriage sprang into motion, but I hardly noticed. Captain Callum, his cheeks as red as the others’, wiped my brow with a damp handkerchief, but it

wasn't enough to extinguish the fire in my face. The carriage rattled and jerked. Captain Callum shouted in a fluster, "Alan! Eric! Focus on driving!"

"Elder Sister, um, where exactly did Prince Leon just kiss y—"

"Idiot! Stale! Don't make me think about it again! Focus on Princess Pride! Her face looks really r—"

"We *should* think about it! Depending on where he kissed her, he really might have hurt h—"

"It was on the cheek! The *cheek*! Don't make me say it out loud, moron!"

"Hey, Arthur! You can't speak to His Highness like th—"

"What're you talking about?!"

Their argument washed right over me. I was still reeling, trying to process the fact that the most seductive and charming character in all of ORL had declared me his first love.

I'd known Leon the moment I saw him. He was unforgettable, more charming and dashing than any other love interest—but he wasn't supposed to fall for *Pride*. The whole time we trundled back to the inn, I turned that surreal thought over and over in my mind.

She's gone.

I clenched my fist against my chest as I watched the carriage depart. She was really gone. Pain prickled through my chest. She was returning to her homeland, the kingdom of Freesia. A gentle wind blew past me, rustling my hair. She'd restored my whole life to me...and then she was gone.

The carriage grew smaller and smaller until it disappeared entirely, yet the warmth of her touch lingered on my hand and lips.

"Pride..." The wind caught up the murmur of her name and whisked it away. But she'd lit a fire in my heart, a fire young and new that would make her dear to me forever.

"I've had a vision. It's a glimpse of what the future holds for this kingdom

without Prince Leon.”

Pride knew it all. She knew everything about me and my brothers and the direction the kingdom was headed—and she used that knowledge to save me and my kingdom. This wasn’t her homeland; it was just a tiny little country.

“Prince Leon, this kingdom needs you.”

Those words were my salvation. She assured me that I was needed. She said the words I’d longed to hear all my life. I never expected that from another soul.

We were sworn friends.

A “friend.” Me—the man who never had any friends of his own. The man whose own brothers despised him. Her words warmed me in a way no flattery ever had. Plenty of women had tried to earn my favor, but *she* was different. She said that, as sworn friends, we didn’t need any sort of romantic relationship.

It was the first time I’d ever connected with someone like that.

Not even the breaking of our engagement would break our bond. It was dizzying. Until now, if I told a woman I didn’t care to share a future with her, she always left me and disappeared. Yet Pride, no longer my fiancée, would always be there for me.

I was going to help her ensure the prosperity of our kingdoms. Of that I was sure.

A woman wanted me for reasons other than lust—and the world’s most beautiful woman, at that. I was determined to live up to her expectations, no matter what it took.

I was still a twisted soul—both as a person and a ruler. If Pride hadn’t reached out to save me, I would have lost my heart, my will, and my truths without ever having realized any of them.

Erwin hadn’t been wrong. He said I was a doll with no will of its own. He pointed out that I never picked up on their plots. He called me “creepy.” He said I wanted the townsfolk to love me so that I could feel better about myself.

None of that was incorrect. Yet I was sure that I earnestly wanted to live for the sake of my people. I wanted to support them, no matter how twisted a person I might be.

But then Pride interrupted their insults...

"Prince Leon is a proud man who will make a fine king."

"He isn't a doll. He loves the Anemonian people more than he loves himself. He dedicates his life to becoming the kind of king everyone wants him to be. He's a wonderful person."

She knew of my past, my present, and my future...and she approved of me anyway. She said I wasn't a doll, rejecting accusations I'd taken as facts.

The anger she displayed on my behalf shook me to my core. I'd done nothing but make trouble for her, yet she stood tall and stared down my brothers, protecting me from their barbs. It felt like looking up at a parent shielding me from bullies.

And then there were all those shocking revelations she tossed out. Erwin would rule the kingdom if I was gone. When I heard how Anemone would fall into ruin and how the people would suffer, my limbs began to tremble and my chest ached. I felt my shoulders stiffen and my palms grow moist with sweat.

Her premonitions were the real thing. I'd undergone experiences that proved as much to me already. But I didn't know when my father's reign would end. Would it be many more years or just a few? The only certainty was that he couldn't rule forever, a fact that filled me with dread.

Once he was gone, the people would suffer. The kingdom would collapse. On top of that, my brothers would come crawling back to me, the Freesian prince consort, for help once they were in charge.

It sounded like utter hell. My hair stood on end just picturing it. As my blood ran cold, I knew my face must have an awful pallor. If my brothers came to me and asked me to fix their ruined kingdom...

I knew I would want to return, but I couldn't just leave for Anemone—not as the prince consort of Freesia. No doubt I would be desperate to return to my homeland. I would struggle and agonize and grieve over it. But in the end, my

sense of duty would keep me in Freesia. I could see the whole disaster unfolding before me.

Pride had answered Erwin's questions. She explained that many townsfolk and guards were going to witness my shame in that tavern. My brothers, rulers of Anemone. I, Freesia's prince consort, trapped in yearning. Finally, when she correctly detailed the conversation between my father and my brothers, and when I saw Father rise to his feet in shock, it was then that the realization hit me once more.

Pride had saved not just me, but my entire kingdom.

"No matter what your crimes may be, I will never allow you to cause more harm to this kingdom, or to Prince Leon, as my sworn friend."

We were allied kingdoms. That was the extent of our relationship. But she still came to save me, and even called me her sworn friend.

"Should you disobey that order, you will become enemies of the woman known as Pride Royal Ivy. I will then personally carry out your punishment."

Why did she go so far for us? I didn't think I could have done the same in her position, yet she had worked frantically to save a land that wasn't even hers.

"What was it you hoped to do after gaining control of the kingdom?"

Though Pride spoke to my brothers, when she said those words, I couldn't help thinking of the people of this kingdom. I wanted them to be proud of Anemone. I wanted them to live with smiles on their faces. I wanted to watch over them forever.

I could hardly imagine a more powerful form of happiness.

"If the first thing that comes to your minds isn't the image of your people, then that says it all. You have no right to deny someone with as noble a heart as Prince Leon." It was as if she'd seen right into my soul. The sheer shock was enough to make me go rigid. My heart burned in my chest, my knees quivered, and something welled up in my throat.

I was simply so, so happy. She had accepted every single part of me, including my past. Before her, no one had ever appreciated me for something deeper

than my looks or my studies. Throughout my entire life, no one had ever understood or accepted all of my flaws and desires. The joy and gratitude that flooded me in that moment was almost too much to withstand.

She'd not only saved me—she'd saved my past, present, and future too.

“Prince Leon, be proud of yourself. Embrace your love for your people.”

With the utmost gentleness, she'd released me from the burden I'd carried all my life.

“Your heart, and this kingdom you love, are both beautiful.”

The tears fell freely.

Joy, grief, glee, pain, gratitude, happiness, happiness happiness happiness. The feelings raged inside me, surging like a tidal wave, twisting and churning before they crashed over me.

Pure? Noble? Beautiful? But no one in this world is more deserving of those words than you, I thought in that moment. From the bottom of my heart, I believed her to be the most beautiful, most noble, purest, and most majestic person in the world.

“Do you promise to love the people of your kingdom, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, to adore and protect them, and to dedicate yourself to improving their lives?”

These were the first words of love she'd ever spoken to me—a pledge of love for my kingdom's people. I didn't need to think about the answer; it had waited inside of me my whole life.

Mother and Father loved this kingdom, and the Anemonian people loved them. Their noble blood flowed through me and, just like them, I sought this land's peace and prosperity above all else. Being born to this royal lineage was the greatest honor of my life. I was proud to share Anemonian blood with the people of this land.

My blood, flesh, and soul always belonged here. The love in my bones nearly made me mad. I had hugged Pride tightly against me as I made my vow of eternal love for this kingdom.

“I’ve done wrong, haven’t I?”

Father stood at my side, staring off into the distance where Pride’s carriage had disappeared.

“What do you mean?” I asked him, but he just smiled and patted my shoulder.

“If Princess Pride wasn’t the heir to her throne, your engagement wouldn’t have had to be dissolved. I’m sorry,” Father said. It was strange to hear him worry about me.

“As soon as the treaty was prepared to end my engagement to Pride, I did feel an ache in my heart,” I admitted.

When I realized I was nearing the end of my time with her, regret suddenly stabbed at my chest. I didn’t *want* to stop being her fiancé. Even though she told me we would still see each other in the future, though for different reasons this time, it wounded my heart to watch her go.

“I really do love the people of this kingdom,” I said. “There could be no replacement for that love. Besides...”

“Very well, Leon. I look forward to seeing you again.”

“We will meet again.”

I would still get to see the woman I cared so much about. I would still have many chances to witness her smile. That was more than enough to satisfy me.

“I’ll still see Pride on many occasions,” I went on. “We’ll simply be sworn friends now.”

Sworn friends. For some reason, those words filled me with pride rather than pain. I was sworn friends with a woman as noble, dignified, and pure as her. My only regret was that I wouldn’t get to feel her hair and skin as I had when I was her “fiancé.” I wished I hadn’t squandered so much of our brief engagement. I should have taken the time to touch her more. I should have left proof of my love all over her body.

The woman to whom I owed a great debt. My savior. Fiancée. Sworn friend. None of those words were enough. I wanted a title even more special to

describe what I felt for her, especially now that we had to spend most of our time apart caring for our respective kingdoms. We had no future together.

Still, I hoped that she would think of me—that, for even a brief moment, I would fully occupy her mind, that I would remain in her heart.

It was the first time I'd ever felt this way about a woman. I knew I would probably spend my life with another woman once I became king, but right now, I wanted to give Pride something special that I could never give anyone else.

There was no touching those lovely lips of hers. They belonged to the man with whom she would someday share her life. But I could still get close. I resisted the urge to kiss her lips, landing next to them instead.

First love. I never knew those words could send such pain and heat surging through my chest. Along with it came the bittersweet flush of fondness coursing throughout my body.

"I look forward to seeing them again soon. Both Freesia...and Pride."

I closed my eyes and imagined her. It was like she was right in front of me. Her beautiful voice rang in my mind, as though she were whispering in my ear.

When exactly did she become capable of lighting such a spark inside my heart? When did I really and truly fall in love with her? I wasn't sure.

Maybe it was when she accepted all of my weaknesses, or maybe it was when she revealed my true desire to me. It could have been when she accepted and rejected each of the persistent anxieties I shared with her, or perhaps when she took my hand and promised to make me happy. There was also that moment when I learned she was going to save my kingdom and the time she returned everything I once lost. The time she called me her "sworn friend." The time she rejected the way Erwin described me. The time she made me take a vow of love for my kingdom. Thinking back on all those moments now, it was little wonder she'd inspired such dramatic emotions within me.

I had fallen in love with her. That was the plain, unchanging truth.

I loved my kingdom. I loved its people. Yet my heart still overflowed with more love than it could contain. If I was allowed one place to store it...I wanted that place to be in Pride.

I decided to keep loving her until the day when I had to give that love away.

“Your Highness, are you feeling quite all right?”

A voice broke through the haze in my head. Captain Callum approached, cradling a steaming cup of tea he must’ve received from the staff at the inn.

Even after I recovered from the way Leon flustered me, I’d spent the carriage ride perfectly still and staring blankly at the floor. Now I sat in a chair near the carriage while my maid fanned me. I was still flushed, like I had a fever, and coherent thought barely trickled back into my brain.

“Perhaps you’d like some black tea? If it doesn’t suit your tastes, I can take it away.”

Captain Callum offered it to me with pink-tinged cheeks, maybe from the steam. He then reported that he’d finished checking out of our room at the inn. I cupped the tea while he spoke, breathing in the refreshing, earthy aroma. My shoulders relaxed a bit.

With my head clearing, I realized only Captain Callum and the two maids stood near me. When Captain Callum saw me looking around for the others, he whispered, “Stale dragged Arthur off somewhere, so Alan and Eric are looking for them. Val is likely on his way to pick up the last of the luggage.”

Once we returned to our room at the inn, Val—on Stale’s orders—had apparently helped pack up all our luggage. Most of it was loaded into the carriage already. I’d missed so much while still dazed from Leon’s forwardness.

I sipped at the tea, hoping to untangle my thoughts. The gentle flavor gave me something calming to cling to.

“Have you...managed to calm down a bit?”

I looked up at Captain Callum and tilted my head to the side...then realized how much he must know about why I was scattered. Oh no. Did everyone know? Had they all watched Leon kiss me and seen me flounder like a child? My mind sizzled so fiercely I couldn’t believe it wasn’t audible. Captain Callum rushed to apologize.

“F-forgive me!”

“I-It’s all right! I’m the one who should apologize. I’m sorry for how I acted earlier... It’s unbecoming of a princess.” I hurriedly offered an apology of my own. As my thoughts settled, I realized that everyone must have seen that shameful display outside the carriage. The heat wouldn’t leave my face.

“It’s perfectly fine!” Captain Callum assured me, smiling. Then, more timidly, he added, “Besides, Prince Leon’s actions were quite brash.”

I smiled back, but the reminder brought back Leon’s earlier words.

He had called me his first love.

I didn’t understand what he meant by that. In the game, Leon and Pride had no romance at all. They were simply a dominating ruler and her victim. Pride kept a tight grip on Leon. She even pretended to love him and get jealous over him to aggravate his trauma, but it was all a farce. Even when Tiara entered Leon’s route, Pride never really *cared* about having him stolen away. Her hatred and contempt for Tiara persisted regardless.

The same went for Leon. He feared Pride, but he never loved her—not even a little. Pride was selfish and tyrannical, not even the kind-hearted Leon ever sympathized with her, nor did he feel any guilt over falling in love with Tiara. If anything, he worried about those feelings causing Tiara harm. Until Pride met her end, he only ever saw her as an enemy and never a “fiancée.” So, *why?*

“My first love.” Why would he say such a thing? Why did he kiss me on the cheek?

Perhaps, even though it was never mentioned in the game, Leon fell in love with Pride at first sight. Maybe she was his type. Maybe he secretly did love her until she started treating him badly. But that meant I had trampled all over that love, completely unaware the entire time.

I could still feel a slight tingle beside my mouth where he’d kissed me. The phantom sensation of his fingers lingered in my hair. I found myself falling back into thoughts of Leon until Captain Callum spoke to me again.

I wondered if Pride...if I really should have stayed in a relationship with Leon after all. My past life was an ordinary one. I had no romantic experience to

speak of *here* either. I still wasn't sure exactly what it meant to fall in love with someone.

I wasn't wrong to call off our engagement—I was sure of that. Even if Leon and Pride were engaged in the game, it didn't mean there was any true love there. But then Leon had gone and confessed his feelings for me as we parted. Leon loved me. And I never even got a chance to...

“I believe you've given him the response he needed.”

Jolted out of my daze, I gasped when Captain Callum finished my thought for me. For a moment, I doubted what I'd heard, but the look in those reddish-brown eyes and his serene smile told me those words were meant for me.

“Prince Leon called you his first love,” he said. “That shows just how much all of your deeds meant to him.”

My deeds? What deeds? I definitely don't think ending our engagement had anything to do with being his first love.

“A kiss on the cheek carries the meaning of ‘deep affection’ and ‘favor.’ Also, as you parted ways, he didn't try to stop you by saying he loved you. He merely referred to you as his first love.”

Captain Callum took hold of my hand. He touched my fingers gently and timidly, as if handling something precious. My skin was warm from the tea. The heat passed through his gloves to warm his hand as well.

“I'll tell you the words that would have driven me to kiss your cheek if I was Prince Leon.”

Warmth lingered in his cheeks as he stared directly into my eyes. The wind rustled his hair.

““I loved you for returning my heart, my pride, and my love back to me. This kiss is meant as a symbol of my gratitude and a show of the special love I have for you. Even if we can't spend our lives together, there shall be no doubt that you have my unending appreciation and, in this moment alone...you have my love as well.”

The world lit up around me. Captain Callum's words sent goosebumps fanning

across my skin. It was as if a fog lifted and cleared my vision. Everything Leon said and did suddenly clicked into place in my head.

Leon loved me.

It had nothing to do with the game's setting or backstories. He loved *me* as a person. He expressed his gratitude in ways I could see and feel. This was a special form of love just for me, separate from the love he gave to his country and his people.

I was overcome with happiness.

It didn't mean that he'd fallen in love with me completely. But still, it was *me*—not the Pride from the game—who had earned his good favor and gratitude. In the game, all I was capable of was stealing his happiness from him. It was such a blessing to know that, at least here, I'd done quite the opposite.

"I'm not sure if you're aware, Your Highness," Captain Callum went on, "but from our perspective, you were the reason that Prince Leon was able to receive so much favor, love, and compassion. I believe he used the only means he had to show how much that meant to him."

He responded to what I did for him. My chest squeezed tight and warm. It wasn't about a relationship or anything like that. He didn't need me to say "I love you" back. Leon already had the last word when he swore to grant my wish to bring his kingdom and his people their happiness. That was his answer, and I accepted it.

"Thank you for saying that."

Captain Callum kept his kind gaze fixed on me. I smiled back at him from the bottom of my heart. His eyes widened, face reddening the longer we stood like this. I clung to his hand to steady him as he began to quiver.

"Arthur was right. You really are a wonderful person," I said, recalling Arthur's high praise for this man. My smile naturally grew wider.

"Captain Callum's amazing. He's always been real good at reading people's emotions, even their deepest thoughts and struggles. He sees it all and knows just how to respond."

Arthur and the rest of the knights were lucky to have such a wonderful captain. I could feel myself relax, buoyed by admiration.

Captain Callum blushed, lips trembling. “Y-you’re much too kind!”

He stared at the ground. The sudden change in his demeanor made me chuckle. His face grew redder than his hair, all because he was so moved to receive praise from a member of the royal family.

“Callum? Princess Pride?”

I turned to find Captain Alan. He stood behind Stale, with Arthur and Vice Captain Eric at his back. For some reason, they all stared at us in shock. Were they simply surprised to see that I was alert and moving again? But I was glad they arrived when they did. I was just about to apologize for my previous state, when suddenly...

“Oh! No, it’s nothing!” Captain Callum shouted before I could attempt to explain.

I cocked my head, confused by the red-faced knight’s sudden rush to offer excuses. When I took a better look, I saw that the wide-eyed and slack-jawed men were all staring at one point in particular. Following their eyes, I realized it was my hand in Captain Callum’s that drew their attention. Wait, surely they hadn’t gotten the wrong impression by walking up and witnessing this? *But I’m the one who’s squeezing his hand right now!*

“C-Captain Callum was kind enough to offer me some advice,” I explained. “He was a big help in putting my thoughts in order. Thank you very much, Captain.” I loosened my grip on his hand so he could slip it out, careful not to appear rude. “I’m sorry for how I behaved earlier, but I’m all right now.” I flashed a reassuring smile.

“Are you...sure you’re fine, Elder Sister? Even after...what happened back there?” Stale said.

“Yes, I feel better now. It’s thanks to Callum that now...I’m simply happy.”

My smile turned a bit shy. That only seemed to make our four onlookers more uneasy as their eyes skipped between me and Captain Callum. Just then...

“Hey, Mistress! Take a bit longer, why don’t ya?! I wanna make it home before it gets dark!”

The sudden roar drew everyone’s attention. Val, who must have finished loading our luggage long ago, leaned against the packed-up carriage and glared. He clicked his tongue, scowling as he waited for the rest of us to start moving.

“Shall we get going, Elder Sister?” Stale said, half-sighing. “We can continue this conversation in the carriage.”

When I agreed, the men headed toward the carriage. Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric shared gleeful looks, almost mocking as they jabbed Captain Callum with their elbows, asking, “What happened here?”

“Alan. Eric. One of you can trade places with me in the passenger car,” Captain Callum muttered, still flushed.

The knights rejected his offer. I could understand why. They’d have to change clothes to swap. Perhaps constantly sitting inside the passenger car was a tiring duty.

Something lit up in Arthur’s eyes. He stood behind the captain and looking back and forth between Captain Callum and me. When he met my eyes, he raised his eyebrows as though to say, *See? How amazing is Captain Callum?!* That sparkle in his eyes was rather cute. When I smiled and nodded, he broke into a grin. He really did love Captain Callum.

While Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric boarded the coach seats, the rest of us entered the passenger car. For some reason, a strange atmosphere filled the carriage as we prepared to depart. Arthur was still looking back and forth between Captain Callum and me, clearly desperate to ask for more details, while the captain himself kept his red face glued to the ground. Maybe the attention from the younger knights made him bashful.

Stale finally spoke to break the awkwardness. “Anyway, Elder Sister, what did you mean when you said you were happy now?”

I nearly explained everything Captain Callum said before but hesitated, struggling to put it into words. It could embarrass the captain even more, not to mention yours truly. It was probably better to postpone this conversation, but

we had only just left the gates of Anemone and had a long journey ahead of us.

Knock knock.

The sound came from outside the carriage—a carriage traveling at full speed, mind you.

We all knew exactly who our visitor was. Arthur took a peek to confirm, then opened the curtains for Stale and me to see. Sure enough, there was Val, with Khemet on his shoulder and Sefekh gripping his legs. He raced alongside the carriage using his special power to glide over the earth on a lump of dirt, much like a surfer riding a wave. Despite the speed of the carriage, I was no longer surprised that he could keep up with us.

“What is it?” I said.

He grimaced. “Don’t you guys ever shut up? I’ve had to listen to your crap ever since you made me start loading the luggage,” he griped.

Wait, had he eavesdropped on our entire conversation?

“It’s none of your business,” Stale answered bluntly, but Val ignored him and continued with a click of his tongue.

“First it was the debate about if Mistress got kissed on the lips or the cheek, then the argument about if she fell in love with the kid or not. Don’t royals and knights have anything better to do?”

Every man in the carriage choked when Val dropped that bomb on us.

“Stop that!” I cried, pounding on the window, but Val’s lips turned up in a smirk.

“Not that I know any details,” he said, moving his face up close to the window to peer at me. “So? Tell me all about it, Mistress. Did the kid steal a kiss on the lips? Did he steal your heart along with it? Or maybe it was even more than that? Was he the first one to take you in be—”

“He only kissed my cheek! We haven’t done anything more than that! He’s my sworn friend, that’s it!”

I tried to yell over Val’s accusations before he could say anything more inappropriate. I stood up in a huff, only to smack my head against the ceiling.

Val witnessed it all from outside the window and cackled, pointing at me as he did. For a moment, I really considered using my power to order him to get lost.

“Well, that’s great to hear! Don’t ya think, boys?!”

Val burst into laughter all over again. I worried I wasn’t the only one getting increasingly annoyed in that carriage.

Yet when I looked, Captain Callum, Stale, and Arthur all looked away, completely silent, their ears burning red. *Was me hitting my head really that funny to them? Actually, I don’t hear complaints from the driver’s seats either.*

Val shrugged. “Who cares? What does it matter if it was a kiss on the cheek or the lips or the chest or the feet?”

“It does matter!” Arthur said.

“It does matter!” Captain Callum echoed.

They both finally looked at me, their faces ablaze.

“Poor little guy,” Val went on. “His own fiancée calls him a sworn friend, and everyone gets all worked up into a fuss just because of a little kiss. It’s not like you hopped into bed together.”

“He wasn’t her fiancé at that point! He was her ex-fiancé!” Stale said.

“Huh?”

Val did a double take at Stale’s frantic explanation. He’d positioned his elbow against the window frame to rest his head in his hand, but this made him stand up straight. It was unusual for Stale to lose his composure like this. Arthur also seemed startled by the fact that Captain Callum had shouted too.

“Elder Sister ended her engagement to Prince Leon!” Stale said. “She doesn’t belong to anyone anymore!”

Val’s eyes went wide and his jaw dropped. Just as I began to wonder what had brought this on, Val suddenly disappeared from the window.

I panicked for a moment when I heard a cry of “Gah!” and screams from Khemet and Sefekh. Then, from behind the carriage, Sefekh shouted, “Hey! Watch it! You’re supposed to be in charge of this thing!” I peeked out the

window as Val's power brought the trio back up to the carriage.

"Wait a second, Mistress. Is that for real? The engagement's off?"

His dark brown hair was disheveled—perhaps an indication of how hard he'd fallen—but he glared at me, heedless of the messiness.

"It hasn't been made public yet, so don't tell anyone," I ordered. Val just stared at me through the window. Apparently, he hadn't gleaned that tidbit of information through his eavesdropping.

With a scowl, he sped up and flew past the carriage to disappear into the distance. Everyone blinked as he raced away, but then the carriage slowed, gradually coming to a stop.

Just as Captain Callum called up to the drivers to figure out what happened, raucous laughter broke out, followed by a rumbling in the earth itself. *What?! No way, no way, no way!*

The motion struck me as incredibly familiar. I peeked out the window to find the ground swelling up, taking the carriage with it. Arthur, making the same connection I did, cried out, "Even the horses?!" as the creatures whinnied frantically.

The ground continued to rumble, sending the carriage skidding against the earth. Stale and I were pushed back in our seats, much like being inside a bus that had suddenly stopped out of nowhere, while Arthur and Captain Callum nearly fell forward.

"What the hell's going on?! Is this an attack?!" Captain Callum shouted.

"It's not an attack! I think it's Val's special power," Arthur said.

"The ground's rumbling and taking the carriage with it?!"

Val's amused cackling rang from the driver's seat. Captain Alan cried out in excitement.

"Hell yes! What a rush! Can you go any faster?!" he said.

"Captain Alan," Vice Captain Eric snapped. "Please don't encourage him! We need to go a lot slower, actually!"

It was unusual to hear Vice Captain Eric yell at anyone. But the speed only increased. The world blurred outside the window, like we were caught on a roller coaster. *Well, it's certainly going to help us to get to Freesia faster! But we're only one country over and we'd still get home if we just went at a normal speed!*

"Val, slow down at once!"

The carriage began to steady at my command. Strangely enough, Val kept on laughing anyway.

We caught our breaths. In less than an hour, we made it safely back to the kingdom of Freesia.

Chapter 4:

The Tyrannical Princess and the Mistake

“AFTER RECEIVING MOTHER’S PERMISSION, I have broken off my engagement to Prince Leon with the consent of both parties. Prince Leon will remain in the kingdom of Anemone as the official heir to the throne. We also formed a treaty detailing regular visits between our two countries, which I believe will help preserve the friendly alliance between our lands.”

Stale and I had come to the throne room after returning to Freesia, where we were presenting the treaty for Mother to review. Since I already had her permission for all this, I was certain no problems would arise. However...

“So your premonition really was correct,” Mother said.

She followed this comment with an uncharacteristically deep sigh. Then she hung her head. Father signaled to Prime Minister Gilbert, who came to accept the treaty from us.

“Everything appears to be in order,” he noted. “Through this agreement, they have formally ended their engagement and established a new treaty.”

Prime Minister Gilbert handed the document over to Father, who passed it to Uncle Vest. Finally, it made its way to Mother,

but all she did in response to the document was sigh once again. Her face looked a bit paler than usual.

“I see...”

She rested her head in her hands and exchanged a look with Uncle Vest and Father. The pair ordered the guards to leave. After a chorus of soft taps against the floor and a quiet squeak of the door, only the six of us remained.

Once the door shut with a thud, a hush fell over the room. Mother still refused to speak, even with the room empty. She pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead for an entire minute before she finally began to speak.

“This means that, as you foresaw, the younger princes’ scheme has been

exposed?”

“Yes,” I said. “The king was informed as well. In response, he punished his younger sons and made Prince Leon heir to the throne.”

I went on, explaining how His Majesty requested our engagement be called off. As soon as I got to the word “punished,” Prime Minister Gilbert’s sharp glare and Uncle Vest’s furrowed brow both softened. As supporters of a monarch themselves, the younger princes’ actions must have deeply disturbed them. I couldn’t agree more.

“Pride, it’s as you told me a week ago,” Mother said. ““The kingdom of Anemone will fall into ruin without Prince Leon.””

It was true. One week ago, I told Mother what I needed to do in Anemone—and how it was all for the sake of its people. I explained that the two young princes would be discovered as the source of the terrible rumors about Leon and that, once the king was informed, he would name Prince Leon as heir to the throne. I said that, due to all of this, I wanted to return the prince to his homeland. Anemone’s fate would be a tragic one without Leon.

Once Mother heard everything, she finally allowed me to visit the kingdom of Anemone in secret, act as her proxy, dissolve my engagement, and form new treaties. This crisis wouldn’t stay contained within Anemone’s borders otherwise—it would threaten our whole alliance if I married Leon only to watch his kingdom fall into ruin.

The premonition took Mother and Father aback. Even Uncle Vest, who was usually so calm and collected, blinked in surprise. Prime Minister Gilbert dropped a stack of documents on the floor.

“I never imagined the young princes could act so foolishly,” Mother said, sighing yet again. The veneer of regal solemnity she usually wore was slipping away.

She and her aides had interviewed Erwin and Homer when selecting my fiancé. They’d concluded that only Leon was a suitable match. But not even Mother knew he was the victim of a plot to steal the throne. No one had any idea his leadership skills would only ever apply to Anemone either.

“Premonitions are mere glimpses into an uncertain future,” Mother went on, her head still hung low. “I know this from my own experience. That’s why I allowed you to visit Anemone in secret. I suppose I was wrong to hope all our fears would be for nothing.”

She was right about that. Premonitions weren’t guarantees. Plus it was difficult for Mother or me to convince foreigners of the veracity of our visions. That was why we were always one step behind. A direct warning from Mother would only prevent the problem for a short time while the princes figured out how to change their methods. Then we’d be defenseless all over again.

“I’m so sorry, Pride.”

Her voice was soft. I doubted my ears for a moment, but she hunched forward, cradling her head in her hands as she apologized. Father set his hands on her shoulders from behind. Uncle Vest solemnly closed his eyes, waiting patiently. Prime Minister Gilbert bowed his head and took a step back.

“Mother?”

What on earth happened? I’d never seen Mother look so depressed. Stale, standing behind me, adjusted his glasses without a word.

“I’m so sorry your engagement had to end like this, even if there was a good reason,” Mother told me. “I’ll find you the right person very soon. I promise.”

“Th-that’s quite all right, Mother. Please don’t let it upset you. I still have much more to study before I become queen. There’s no need to rush—”

“No, it *must* be soon!”

Mother shouted over me. She clasped her own hands tight, white-knuckled, and squeezed as if trying to hold something at bay. Even from a distance, I could see her shoulders shaking under Father’s grip. Her lips, which always produced nothing but the most elegant of words, parted to speak.

“I finally...*finally*...felt like I’d been a proper mother to you!” she cried, her voice high and shrill.

Mother reached up to touch one of Father’s hands against her shoulder. She made a fist with the other and slammed it down against her throne.

“I made yet another mistake!”

Stale and I watched as, for the first time in our lives, our graceful and dignified mother wept. Teardrops rolled down her cheeks like pearls. She covered her face with one hand.

Again? What does she mean? Mother always acted as the perfect queen, serving as an example for me and Tiara. Now she said she’d made a mistake? How could that be? Neither I nor Stale could keep our jaws from dropping.

Mother gripped Father’s hand and went on, like a dam inside her had burst. “Why can’t I do anything right?! No matter how much...I love the people of this kingdom...I can’t even...make my own daughter happy! Why?! Why can’t I do it?!”

Mother squeezed her fist hard enough for her long nails to pierce the skin. Father squeezed her shoulders and coaxed, “Calm down, Rosa,” but Mother shouted over him.

“Why? All I want to do is love you! Love you in a way that you can see!”

Her voice hitched as she continued. I stared, disbelieving, as Mother fell into a state of disarray. Not even Father could reach her.

Stale slid closer and whispered, “Elder Sister...”

This whole scene was like something out of a movie. It was the moment the parent broke down, confessing how much they longed to be a better caretaker for their child. I could only contextualize this through films and news reports I’d watched in my previous life. Through these mediums, a parent desperate to be better for their child was often said to be lacking in work ethic, motivation, or love—although not always. Without those memories, I wouldn’t have been able to understand what I was seeing. Even Stale was completely dumbfounded.

If what I was seeing mirrored my memories in any way, then I had a sinking feeling I knew why Mother suffered so terribly. I stepped forward. I wished I was wrong, that my assumption was mistaken, but...

“Mother, Father, please allow me to speak out of turn,” I said.

Father was wrapping his arms around Mother. Uncle Vest watched me

carefully. From behind, Stale called to me with concern.

Now that I thought about it, I wondered why I never expected the woman I called “Mother” to treat me like a daughter. Even before I regained the memories of my past life, I never once sought a parental relationship with her. She was always simply “the queen” to me—a perfect, immaculate being, even though she was just as human as the rest of us.

As I reached the small stairs leading up to the throne, Prime Minister Gilbert offered me his hand. His tender smile eased my mind as I neared the queen.

“Mother.”

At my call, she slumped off her throne to the floor. It was clear this pain had lurked within her for a long, long time. I hated that I’d never noticed until now.

Mother sat on the floor, wrinkling her dress as Father continued to caress her. He’d probably supported her like this their whole lives, silently in the background. No one else had seen it until now, but it was clear this was how their relationship had always been.

I’d always wondered if Mother hated me, in truth. She hadn’t even agreed to meet with me until Tiara’s birthday party. I never once had a real, honest conversation with her. She let me participate in the official duties required of the crown princess and granted me special rights and privileges, but that was the extent of our relationship. It was nothing like my bond with my mother from my past life—yet I’d never questioned this icy relationship.

There were plenty of reasons for Mother to hate the horrible, selfish princess from my youth. That was why I needed to speak up now. I had to be the one to tell her, and no one else.

“Mother, I know you love me.”

She lurched, then peeled her hands away from her face to peer up at me.

“I love you as well. Mother, Father, I love you both for all the happiness you’ve given me.”

I climbed one more step, stopping before the final stair. Mother’s eyes, swollen from her bawling fit, watched me avidly.

“My life as the firstborn princess began when I was eight years old,” I said. “It wasn’t because of my newfound precognition. It was because of Father’s love, and meeting Stale for the first time, and finally seeing Tiara. And it was because of you too, Mother. It came from the moment I received your approval.”

The memories of my life from eight years ago were mostly hazy now, but those feelings were seared into my heart. I saved Father from the carriage accident, became close with Lotte and Mary, met my guard, Jack, and encountered Stale and Tiara for the first time—all these memories were still as vivid as the day they occurred. The same went for the words Mother shared with me during Tiara’s birthday party.

“As the crown princess, I love this kingdom and I love its people. I always, always have.”

With that, I climbed the last step. Whenever I visited Mother, I always looked up at the throne, but now she sat at my feet. It was a most peculiar feeling. I lowered and took Mother’s hands in mine. She kept her eyes fixed on me as slow tears carved down her cheeks.

“Mother, you told me something back then.”

It was Tiara’s very first birthday celebration. Stale and Tiara displayed their support for me in front of the crowd. The people cheered for me. Then Mother said those words.

“The people here are expecting great things from you. I want you to make sure you never forget this moment.”

“Mother, you’re the one who told me to hold on to that moment.”

I squeezed her hands. I couldn’t believe how thin they felt, how small. Mother’s lips quivered as tears spilled down her smooth, youthful cheeks. I noticed then the faint signs of aging around her eyes and mouth.

“As my mother, you gave me all the knowledge, training, discipline, and power I would need to become queen.” She had given me everything I needed. “I love you. And I know you love me. I would never, ever hesitate to declare that with my head held high.”

I’d never held her gaze like this before. Mother reached her trembling arms

out to wrap me in a hug. It was the first embrace of its kind I could remember receiving from her. I immediately returned the gesture, wrapping my arms around her slender body.

My mother had to know that I felt her love. She wasn't the type of mother I was used to, but we were a queen and a firstborn princess. Our relationship revolved around that. She taught me so many things, including how to care for this kingdom I loved.

"I had a vision!" Mother declared.

Everyone gulped, shock rippling through the room.

Mother's voice shook as she continued. "More than ten years ago...I saw it... I saw how you loved to hurt anyone weaker than you...and you did it over and over again... I always had that same grim vision!"

My mind went blank. My blood ran cold. Mother didn't seem to notice. As I fell limp, she reached to pull my head closer against her.

"Pride, I'm so sorry! I was scared of a future where you hurt people. I thought you'd use the powers of a queen as a weapon. That's why, until you were eight and I stopped seeing your future in my visions, I'd always, always... You've grown into such a wonderful princess, yet I never believed in your future. I never tried to change it!"

She sobbed out an apology, but the words didn't reach my ears.

Mother knew. She knew about my real future. That was why she avoided me for those eight years. I never knew that the wicked queen Pride...that I was already torturing her then.

She wasn't wrong; I really could turn out like that. If I hadn't regained my past life memories, the last boss queen Pride would have hurt countless people. She would turn Stale into her slave, allow the order of knights to suffer many casualties, force those with special powers to choose between death or slavery, destroy Leon's heart, and send Anemone into ruin. *But she stopped seeing visions of my future when I was eight? Because I got my past life memories back?! Then what right do I have to be angry with Leon's brothers?*

Just as Leon's brothers would destroy their kingdom in the game's true

storyline, I was on the verge of doing the same. Their crimes paled in comparison to my own. I would kill many more people, wound more people, cause far more suffering. That was why Pride was so despised; that was why she was doomed to meet her end at the hands of those she'd harmed.

Mother's words were a solemn reminder. If I hadn't regained the memories of my past life, that was exactly the person I would become.

I slowly shook off my shock and hugged Mother back. She was still apologizing, but I was the one who truly should have confessed.

"Thank you for loving me now, despite all of that," I said. "Thank you...and I'm so sorry I scared you."

She shook her head at my apology. Even though she knew of my future as a tyrant, she still loved me as I was now. I could only imagine how my own mother must have feared me for eight long years. Pride, her own daughter. Knowing the crimes I would commit, she had no choice but to fear me.

Yet she still loved me now. I wanted to make it up to her. She needed to know that the future she foresaw had changed, that everything was all right now. Someday, I wanted her to smile at me without any fear or worry at all.

"There's nothing to fear, Mother. My fiancé, my succession, and our relationship as well—there's plenty of time left for all of them."

I spoke slowly, hoping to calm her. She nodded, murmuring, "Thank you." Her heartbreak made tears prickle my eyes. Perhaps that was why I pretended not to notice her worry all this time. Speaking it aloud stirred something in me.

Something felt wrong.

"Big Sister! Big Brother! Welcome home!"

Tiara threw herself into my arms as soon as I left the throne room. She must have been waiting with her maids and guards the whole time.

"I'm glad to be back, Tiara," I said.

"Were you good while we were gone?" Stale asked, stroking her hair. They were so adorable.

“Yes. I stayed in my room and waited for you.” She looked up as if seeking a reward for her good behavior.

“Sorry, Tiara,” I said. “I wish we could have seen you sooner, but we had to report to Mother first.”

“Of course! I’m sorry I wasn’t the first one to welcome you home. I just got so caught up in a book I was reading. But I want to hear all about your trip soon!”

Tiara gripped my hand and started to lead us back to her room. When we got there, we told her the tale, though Stale managed to conceal a lot of the more gruesome details regarding Anemone. We couldn’t simply avoid the topic of the engagement, though.

“What?! Big Sister, you ended your engagement?!” Tiara balked.

“That’s right. Leon must become the Anemonian king.”

After a bit of thought, Tiara cocked her head and said, “In that case...do you have to take a new fiancé?”

“Yes, but I told Mother there’s no need to hurry. I still have much to learn as the heir to the throne.”

Mother tried to insist that she would find a new fiancé right away, but it was no easy task to dig up a suitable prince consort. Political alliances made such arrangements even more fraught. Given the most recent attempt, the whole process might have to change.

“I just know you’ll be able to find another wonderful fiancé! I’m sure of it!” Tiara said.

I just thanked her, smiling awkwardly. *Before that happens...*

“Anyway! I’ll be heading back to my own room now!” Tiara said, hopping out of her chair.

“What? Already?” She usually wanted to spend the entire day with us.

“I’m sure you two are tired after all your travels. Besides...” She trailed off for a moment, seeming embarrassed, then smiled shyly at me. “I don’t need you all to myself the entire day since you’ll always be *our* big sister!”

Tiara strolled out of the room, almost skipping, and promised to see us again at dinner. I didn't understand it, but she was so adorable that I didn't question it either.

I was about to suggest that Stale and I leave it there for the day as well, when...

"Pride." Stale's voice was calm and deep. "May I have a bit of your time?"

His dark eyes bore into mine, so intense he hardly blinked. At the same time, he seemed to be holding back, hesitating over something.

Swallowing hard, I asked, "What is it?" Somehow I managed to keep a smile on my face even as Stale gathered himself with a deep inhale.

"It's about Mother's...premonitions."

I tensed. Everyone had heard Mother in the throne room as she revealed my future as an evil queen who enjoyed tormenting others. Maybe Stale feared I really would go in that direction. It was difficult to glean anything from his studiously blank face. To conceal my anxiety, I sipped at the black tea Lotte had prepared.

"Is that why you were so unforgiving of Prince Erwin and Prince Homer? Was it the same reason that Mother spoke of?" Stale said.

I cocked my head. *What does he mean by that?*

"Back there...it felt like you despised those two boys from the bottom of your heart."

Ba-dump.

My heart leapt into my throat. I hated that he saw me that way, but when I opened my mouth, all I could manage was stuttering. My eyes wandered all over. I lost track of where I was. The flame in my chest I'd tried to stamp out to keep hidden began to rise from its persistent embers.

He saw it. He saw the rage inside of me.

Pain bubbled up within me, tightening and twisting as it wound through my chest.

"I saw how you loved to hurt anyone weaker than you...and you did it over and over again..."

Mother's words sent me back eight years. That was the day when Pride, weeping, begged me to kill her if she became a wicked queen.

I never understood the source of those fears, but as soon as I saw her freeze up at Mother's words, I formed a theory. What if, even before she was eight, Pride saw the same visions as Mother?

Unlike them, I couldn't glimpse the future, so I didn't understand how a person as compassionate as Pride could ever hurt people. Perhaps what Mother saw was just Pride punishing the human traffickers and Leon's brothers. Either way, when Mother said those words in the throne room, Pride went rigid, as though she knew exactly what Mother feared.

If she had the same dire visions when she was eight, her constant fear suddenly made sense. Of course she'd get furious at Erwin and Homer. She couldn't let their actions go unpunished. With Prince Leon as their target, even capital punishment wasn't unreasonable. Pride's anger was totally natural. But considering how she forgave Gilbert, who betrayed the country, and Val, a former criminal, her rage at the young princes was a side of her I had never seen.

What Erwin and Homer had done was despicable. They spread those vile rumors about Prince Leon, filled his head with lies, and even drugged him and left him in a tavern to frame him. These were grave crimes, but they didn't change the fact that Pride's anger back then felt extraordinary. She didn't just catch them; she publicly shamed them by revealing how their foolishness would lead to their kingdom's ruin, how they would go begging to Prince Leon to fix what they destroyed.

But all these predictions were just possible futures. Erwin and Homer hadn't actually ruined the kingdom yet. Still, I could imagine Pride seeing a vision of *herself* doing some of those awful things and being just as harsh, to the point of yearning for death. If she couldn't forgive Erwin and Homer, she certainly wouldn't forgive herself.

“Pride, I’m not sensitive to people’s emotions like Tiara or Arthur,” I began.

She was stiff and pale, clinging to her teacup. Ripples from her quaking moved on the surface.

“But when it comes to you, Pride, I can understand in my own way. I want to understand others too.”

Arthur was the one who noticed Pride’s fake smile during the three days she spent with Prince Leon. Tiara helped us learn what was really in Pride’s heart. Even Val’s disgusting remarks in the carriage helped confirm that Pride wasn’t in love with Prince Leon. I was the only one who didn’t know how to read her emotions.

“Please, just let me hear a little of what’s inside your heart,” I said. “I’ll accept whatever it is you may be feeling.”

I spoke firmly, hoping my words could reach her. She swallowed, setting down her rippling tea with trembling fingers. Immediately, she gripped her own hands. Her eyes filled with a dreadful uncertainty.

“I...” She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, opened them again, and spoke in a wavering voice. “I...couldn’t forgive them!”

Pride’s outburst hung in the air. She looked like she would cry at any moment.

“What do you mean, Pride?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She grabbed for the tablecloth, clinging to it with white-knuckled hands. “I just couldn’t forgive them!”

Tears spilled from her eyes, carving paths down her cheeks as she continued.

“I knew their future. There was even more than everything I said! It was their fault that all those innocent people in the tavern and Leon... But...but they never faced any punishment. Even though they...they...”

A rush of emotion flooded out of Pride. How long had she been holding all this inside her? She covered her face with both hands—though it didn’t conceal her crying at all—and surged to her feet, apparently too overcome to remain sitting.

My heart ached to see her like this. I rose from my chair to stand at her side

and stroke her back. She grabbed my free hand and stared into my eyes with a solemn nod. Suddenly I could feel the depth of the pain she'd carried inside her ever since she was eight.

Pride told me everything, starting with the future those two princes would bring about. Though the princes knew that everyone in the tavern with Prince Leon was innocent, they condemned every last one to execution. Their actions broke Prince Leon's heart, causing him to fall into a deep despair. They plunged the entire kingdom into ruin and ruled together without facing any consequences for their reprehensible actions. I couldn't believe she'd seen so much, let alone carried it by herself for so long. Rage boiled inside me.

So they were more than just idiots. They were complete and total scum. As a prince myself, I could never allow actions like theirs to go unpunished. They represented the worst possible future for Anemone. But Pride was really holding in that anger this whole time?

"I just couldn't forgive them, even though they hadn't done any of those awful things yet," she said. "But what they did... I...I hated them for it."

Even I could tell that the hatred in her voice wasn't just for the princes—she also directed it at herself. Her sleeves were soaked with tears by now.

I didn't know much about the power of precognition—and Pride never told me the specifics of the futures she foresaw—but if she was capable of seeing so many possibilities with such clarity, they had to bring incredible pain. Just as Mother saw a future with an evil version of Pride and chose to distance herself for that reason, Pride must have taken her own vision of the princes' actions as something far more serious than a simple possibility.

But future crimes couldn't be punished until they actually occurred.

Pride had forgiven plenty of other wrongdoers, but these crimes went far beyond what she'd dealt with thus far, and she couldn't do anything about them. She simply had to bear the knowledge in secret, letting it eat away at her heart. That was Pride's burden...and Mother's too.

"It's unforgivable," she said. "Even if it wasn't bound to happen, that premonition where they hurt so many people, where they destroyed the kingdom, where they harmed the people dear to me—I knew that was the

future!”

Pride sobbed, laboring over each word. Some part of me wondered if she was really still talking about Erwin and Homer at this point. She gathered her ragged voice for one loud cry.

“When I looked at the two of them...I saw *me!*”

All the breath fled my lungs, leaving me gasping. *Pride saw herself?* Why did she look at two boys on the verge of becoming tyrants and think of herself? Even if she’d had the same premonition as Mother, wherein she enjoyed hurting the weak, she couldn’t have possibly seen a future as vile as Erwin and Homer’s. So why?

The two princes would plunge the kingdom into turmoil, hurt innocent civilians, and carve permanent scars into the hearts of others. Why did she relate to people like that? Did Pride see a future much worse than what she’d revealed so far? Did she foresee a future even worse than Mother’s, one where she transformed into a completely different person?

That was impossible. Pride would never turn into someone like that. This was definitely some kind of mistake. But as much as I wanted to press her for details, I hesitated to heap any more grief on a girl weeping and tearing herself apart right before my eyes. I could inadvertently twist the knife deeper.

I knew what I had to do.

She gasped as I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her into a hug from behind. Keeping her body close to mine, I rested my head against her shoulder, burying my nose in her soft crimson hair. Her ear brushed against my lips.

Pride was so startled that it interrupted her crying. She said my name in a broken whisper, the familiar sound stirring a fire in my heart.

“It’s all right, Pride. You’ll never turn out like them.”

Pride raised her head. I could feel the heat reddening her face. She stopped trying to wipe her eyes, solely focused on my voice.

“I’ll prove it to you, even if it costs me my life,” I told her.

Horribly, even with her hiccupping in tears, I felt a certain joy at having her to

myself in this moment. Few people could hold her like this.

“You’re more beautiful, noble, merciful, and compassionate than anyone else,” I said.

That’s why we believe in you, why we always want to protect you.

“I... We’ll always be with you. If the unthinkable happens and you really do turn into an evil queen, I promise we won’t let you go too far.”

I wasn’t the only one protecting Pride. So many of those around her yearned to protect her too.

“I know that you couldn’t let the princes’ crimes go unanswered. The fact that you, as you are now, felt true anger at their foolish actions is proof that you’re fit to be the next queen.”

Pride held the arms I hugged around her, keeping her gaze fixed straight ahead so she could absorb my words. Her hiccupping subsided as I spoke.

“Please don’t blame yourself. Don’t hold on to these things by yourself either. I want you to see how much we believe in you...and I want you to believe in us more too.”

“Mm.” Pride’s response came from deep in her throat. Even that simple sound was dear to me. I felt a smile begin to creep on my face.

“I’m here with you. I’ll always be on your side.”

“Right.”

She sniffled cutely, her reply quiet and muffled. She turned in my arms so her eyes, red from crying, could meet mine...

And then our noses bumped together.

The sudden, soft sensation made me shudder, while Pride yelped and leapt backward.

Too close! Pride’s eyes, nose, and lips were really, really close!

Blood surged through my body, making my face hot. It felt as though I’d just been frozen all this time and had snapped into motion. Pride’s eyes widened, and she tilted her head at me.



What...what was I about to do?!

My arms itched. I could still feel her warmth, even through my clothes. *I just wrapped my arms around her so casually!*

"I-I apologize, Pride! I d-didn't mean to..."

Oh no! Even though we're brother and sister, I can't just hug a woman from behind without any warning! Seeing as how Pride had only just broken off her engagement, I couldn't blame her for misinterpreting such actions. In a worst-case scenario, I could face even worse rumors than Prince Leon had.

But suddenly she chuckled. "Hee hee. Thank you, Stale."

A brilliant smile spread across her face, like a flower opening to the sun. She daintily covered her mouth with her hand as her teary eyes crinkled. The lingering heat in her face left a charming glow.

My heart thudded against my chest like a series of punches. I felt warm and dizzy. I didn't even realize I was clutching the front of my shirt for support.

"I'm glad to hear that from you," she said. "I'll rely on you more from now on."

She smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes. It had my heart racing all over again.

"I never expected you to say the exact same things that Arthur did," she added.

That was a surprise. "Arthur...said the same things?"

What exactly did he say?

Pride nodded, looking a bit shy. "He said that you're really strong and really smart, so he feels at ease knowing that you'll always be by my side."

That's just unfair.

Why did I suddenly feel like Arthur had bested me in some contest? I never knew he'd praised me like that. At this point, I couldn't tell if I was blushing because of Arthur or Pride.

"I should get back to my room," I said. "If you need anything at all, just give

the usual signal and I'll be right by your side."

I pressed my black-framed glasses up against my face to hide my blush and headed for the door. Newfound determination nestled in my heart. I opened the door and let Lotte, Mary, and Jack into the room, but just as I was about to close the door again, Pride called out to me.

"Oh?"

"Thank you so much," she said. "I love you."

All the blood in my body rushed to my head in a torrent. *I know, I know. I know she doesn't mean anything deeper than that, but still!*

My head felt like it was about to explode from the sheer destructive force of her words. I adjusted my glasses and looked down to hide my face, "Me too," I mumbled. With that, her guard closed the door, and I was free.

But there was still one place I had to go: I needed to see Mother and get permission to start assisting Uncle Vest.

Now that Pride and Prince Leon's engagement was over, I assumed that my job assisting Uncle Vest would be postponed as well...but I didn't want that. I needed to make progress in my studies. I was determined to support Pride and her next fiancé. Working as the seneschal wouldn't be enough on its own—I wanted to reach a level where I could assist the prince consort in his duties too. When Pride married, I wanted to have a perfect system in place to support her rule.

I wanted to protect Pride forever. I couldn't let her cry like that anymore. I was willing to do anything to prevent that. Being by her side wasn't enough—I wanted the strength to pull her up to greater and greater heights.

The first step was to gain permission to study the duties of the seneschal and, in the future, those of the prince consort. Once I got that permission from Mother, I would eliminate Pride's every source of sorrow.

Everything was for Pride and the Freesian people. For their sake, I would never hesitate.

“Drink up, Arthur! That comes first. We can talk after!”

“You’re wrong... There really isn’t anything worth talking about...”

“Oh, don’t give me that! Her Highness looked so happy! C’mon, have another!”

Cups and glasses clinked around the room. I watched the booze flow as Captain Alan cajoled me to imbibe. I took a swig rather than argue with him further. Captain Alan had dragged me here to his room by force after our training finished for the day.

Meanwhile, Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric tried to clean up some of the booze we’d already gone through. Technically, that was my job as the lowest-ranking knight in the room, but they seemed intent on getting me drunk instead.

Three days had passed since we returned home from Pride’s secret mission. After Captain Alan dragged me back to his room, Vice Captain Eric and Captain Callum joined us for an evening drinking session. This was a favorite activity of Captain Alan’s, and his room boasted an impressive number of bottles, as well as a large table we could all sit around. Every knight who set foot inside his room gaped at how he’d transformed a small regulation bedroom into a tavern.

As Captain Alan tried to coax me into drinking more, Vice Captain Eric and Captain Callum busied themselves with cleaning the room and carrying out the empty bottles. Some part of me knew they were just plying me with alcohol to loosen me up and get more information about my late-night conversation with Pride, but I was quickly losing the will to fight back.

“It was nothing. Arthur just cheered me up a bit.”

On the morning when Leon woke up at the inn, Pride smiled shyly after offering that explanation. Meanwhile, I completely panicked. I knew none of the knights would just let it go.

“Her Highness seemed so happy,” Captain Alan said. “I bet she really trusts her imperial knight. You guarded her room that night, so I know you had a chance to talk. I wish I’d been assigned that post.”

Well, at least he was being honest about his jealousy. But I could hardly form

coherent words without slurring them. Plus, whenever I thought back to that night at the inn my whole face flushed all over again. I kept my mug at my lips to conceal the blush, but every time I lowered it, Captain Alan just refilled my glass. In short, I was doomed.

“This stuff’s one of my favorites,” Captain Alan said as he doled out more.

I bowed my head in thanks each time he topped off my glass, my tongue getting looser with each drink. Despite my inebriated state, I tried to swallow the words. I would die of embarrassment if the other knights learned about that conversation.

Unfortunately, as Captain Alan chattered on cheerfully and I continued to try to avoid the topic of Pride by drinking, I lost track of just how much I had. My head was swirling. My body felt hot. I couldn’t tell if I was exhausted, flustered, or just that drunk.

“What’s the problem with tellin’ us, anyway?” Captain Alan asked. “It’s just a perk of the job! Ooh, don’t tell me you did something stupid like flirt with her?”

“There’s no way in hell I’d do that!” I roared, appalled. I knew I was slurring a bit, but I shouted down the accusation. My pulse thumped in my temples. Whatever the cause, there was no hiding the redness in my face now.

“I’m just messin’ with you,” Captain Alan said with a grin, patting me on the shoulder. “Here, drink this and cool your head a bit.”

He filled my mug yet again. I downed it in one gulp, not daring to speak after I just shouted at a captain. The moment I set the mug back down, Captain Alan went back to pouring.

A perk of the job. I guess he’s not wrong.

My head felt fuzzy. My thoughts veered toward the topic I’d been avoiding all night. After so much cajoling by the others, I couldn’t help thinking back to that night...

On the night we rescued Leon from the tavern, Pride had relocated to a separate room until he awoke.

She changed into pajamas and told us she was preparing for bed, but I didn't think she would be able to relax. I could hear her turning restlessly in the sheets. Even the other knights and I were a little jumpy. Every bump and thump we heard made us fear that Leon's brothers had come to claim him. She must have been anxiously wondering when Leon would finally wake up.

I didn't know it then, but she must have had so much on her mind that night. If Leon didn't step up to claim the throne the next day, his brothers' plot would succeed. She couldn't have known then whether Prince Erwin and Prince Homer would find a way to escape punishment. The whole alliance could have fallen apart.

At some point, she must have heard us walking around outside her room. She stirred and timidly shuffled over to the door. Vice Captain Eric and I stood on the other side, posted as guards.

"Has something happened?" she whispered.

"It sounds like someone is here," Vice Captain Eric said. "I'm sure it's another guard, but I'll go look for myself. While I search the room, you stay here and guard the door, Arthur."

"No, I'll go search," I offered.

"You're her personal knight," the vice captain told me, firmly but gently.

I couldn't really refute that. I had to yield to his suggestion. But even after Vice Captain Eric's footsteps faded, I heard pacing in the room. "Can't sleep?" I asked, conscious of the fact that she was just on the other side of the door.

"No," she replied. She sounded guilty, perhaps for resting at all while we stood guard, but that was our duty.

"It's all right," I tried to reassure her. "Prince Leon's okay, by the look of it, and I really think he's gonna wake up by tomorrow. We'll take him to the castle, expose what his brothers did, and bring him back home with us."

A heavy silence followed. I saw her swallow hard. Was there something she wasn't telling me, something she knew? At the time, I couldn't have guessed that she was about to use her status as the queen's proxy to break off the engagement entirely.

“You have to be happy, Your Highness,” I said. “Prince Leon has to make you happy.”

My voice was too quiet, as though I was speaking mostly to myself, but I really hoped she heard me and understood. I was doing all of this for her and her happiness. In fact, all the knights were doing their best for her and her fiancé.

She didn’t respond and I didn’t push, just let her hold her silence. For a moment, I had a strange feeling she was about to apologize. Looking back on it now, she must have felt painfully guilty, like she was deceiving us, seeing as she soon wouldn’t be engaged at all.

“We’re all on your side, Your Highness,” I said then. “You’re the one we serve.”

I smiled to myself as I pronounced each word. I leaned against the door, wishing I could press reassurance through it.

“Captain Alan’s really, *really* strong,” I said. “He’s really good with a sword too. Oh, but I can still beat him, of course! It’s just that when we fight without weapons in practice matches and stuff, he’s amazing. I’m still losing all of those. Dad and Clark always praise Captain Alan too. Since he’s the captain of the First Squadron, they put him in charge of special units and vanguard missions and all that. But it’s not all talent or anything. He trains a crazy amount every single day because he really cares about that stuff. I never have to worry if I know I’m fighting with him at my back. And even in the First Squadron, where everyone’s really good at combat, they see him as the best of the best.”

I rambled on, hoping that the sound of my voice might soothe some of Princess Pride’s anxiety. I tried to infuse every word with the love I felt for her, and soon I heard her breathing even out into a more normal cadence.

“Vice Captain Eric is a real hard worker,” I went on. “I heard it was a year ago, when I joined the main forces, that he also joined the First Squadron. When you watch him fight, you’d think he’s been there way longer. I don’t think there’s anything he’s bad at. He can use a sword, brawl bare-handed, use rifles, fight on horseback... He’s smart too. It’s amazing how he went straight from being a newbie to being promoted so high. We’re in different squadrons, but I’ve never once seen him slack off during training or practice. And it’s not just pure effort

either. He knows how to make use of his training in real situations. He got promoted to vice captain this year, and the First Squadron's not like mine, so there's not much turnover in positions like that. Still, he's the one who got the job."

I was talking just to talk, trying to provide something calming and familiar for her, but I couldn't keep my genuine admiration for the senior knights out of my voice.

"Captain Callum's amazing. He's always been real good at reading people's emotions, even their deepest thoughts and struggles. He sees it all and knows just how to respond. He even takes care of me and everyone else in the order. It doesn't matter if they're from his squadron or not. Everyone really loves him. I know a lot of knights request to join the Third Squadron because they look up to Captain Callum so much, since he's almost as good a knight as Dad and Clark. I know you've met him many times at public events, Your Highness... Well, that's because he's just that skilled as a knight. Yet he's not arrogant at all, and he always keeps an eye out for everyone. Five years ago, when those cliffs collapsed, I was nothing more than a rotten brat he'd only just met, but he still took good care of me. I haven't been able to repay him for that yet."

I chuckled despite the reminder of such a dark time. I started to feel embarrassed from saying so much, but all my words were absolutely true. The moment I joined the order, I recognized Captain Callum as the man who told me everything would be all right during that awful ambush. He was there for me when I burst into tears upon learning my father was safe.

"All the older knights are really amazing people. When I heard who I'd be going on this mission with, I just knew that everything would be okay. They all really adore you, Your Highness, and they want to keep you safe. They're strong, fine knights and they'll protect you at any cost. Today, tomorrow, and forever. So you don't need to worry."

I paused my spiel on that gentle, reassuring note. My greatest wish was that it helped quell some of Princess Pride's worries and perhaps put a smile on her face.

"You also have Dad, Clark, all the knights, even Prime Minister Gilbert and

Maria, Sefekh and Khemet...and Val, as much as I don't like him. All of them are your allies."

I rattled off their names one by one, hoping she could picture each of their faces.

"No matter what happens, we're here for you. You've got Stale and Tiara at your side too, just like always."

My hand strayed to my sword. Perhaps she could hear the clink of the metal, but the weapon gave me some comfort too. This blade was proof of the status I'd earned as a knight—status that Stale had helped me obtain. He was always by my side, helping me reach new heights.

"Stale's really strong, even without his special power," I said. "He just gets stronger and stronger the more he trains with a sword and practices hand-to-hand combat too. When I teach him the moves I learn from Prime Minister Gilbert, he masters them right away. It's because he's really smart, so I know I can always depend on him. And if you've got him with you all the time, you won't ever have anything to worry about. He'd give up his life for you...and so would I. But that's because we care about you so much. Honestly, I wish I could be at your side to protect you all the time, so it annoys me how I only get to do that during emergencies. But when I think about how Stale will be with you instead, I can rest easy."

I had absolute trust in Stale. We'd trained together for all these years. I knew he would do anything for Her Highness. Just like I would.

"And you've got me too." My voice emerged soft yet decisive. I softened it even more to ask, "Can I open the door a little bit?"

The lock clinked as Her Highness unlatched it and cracked open the door. She was just wearing pajamas as she peeked out at me. I reached my arm through that narrow gap and into her room. I didn't do anything else, just beckoned for Princess Pride with my hand. Timidly, she set her soft, slender fingers in my palm, then grasped my hand. I gave her a reassuring squeeze in return, handling her ever so delicately with my large, calloused hands.

"I'm here for you too," I repeated, passing on my warmth through our touch. "I've been practicing my fencing all these years so that I can protect you. I don't

think anyone's more motivated to keep you safe than I am. No matter what happens tonight, no matter what's waiting for us tomorrow, and no matter what happens in the future, I'll always be here for you. I swear it on my name and my life. I'll always be at your side. I'll always protect you. I'll make that pledge to you as many times as I have to. From here on out, I'm gonna get stronger and stronger so I can protect you from everyone and everything. Whenever you feel scared, I'll be here to hold your hand."

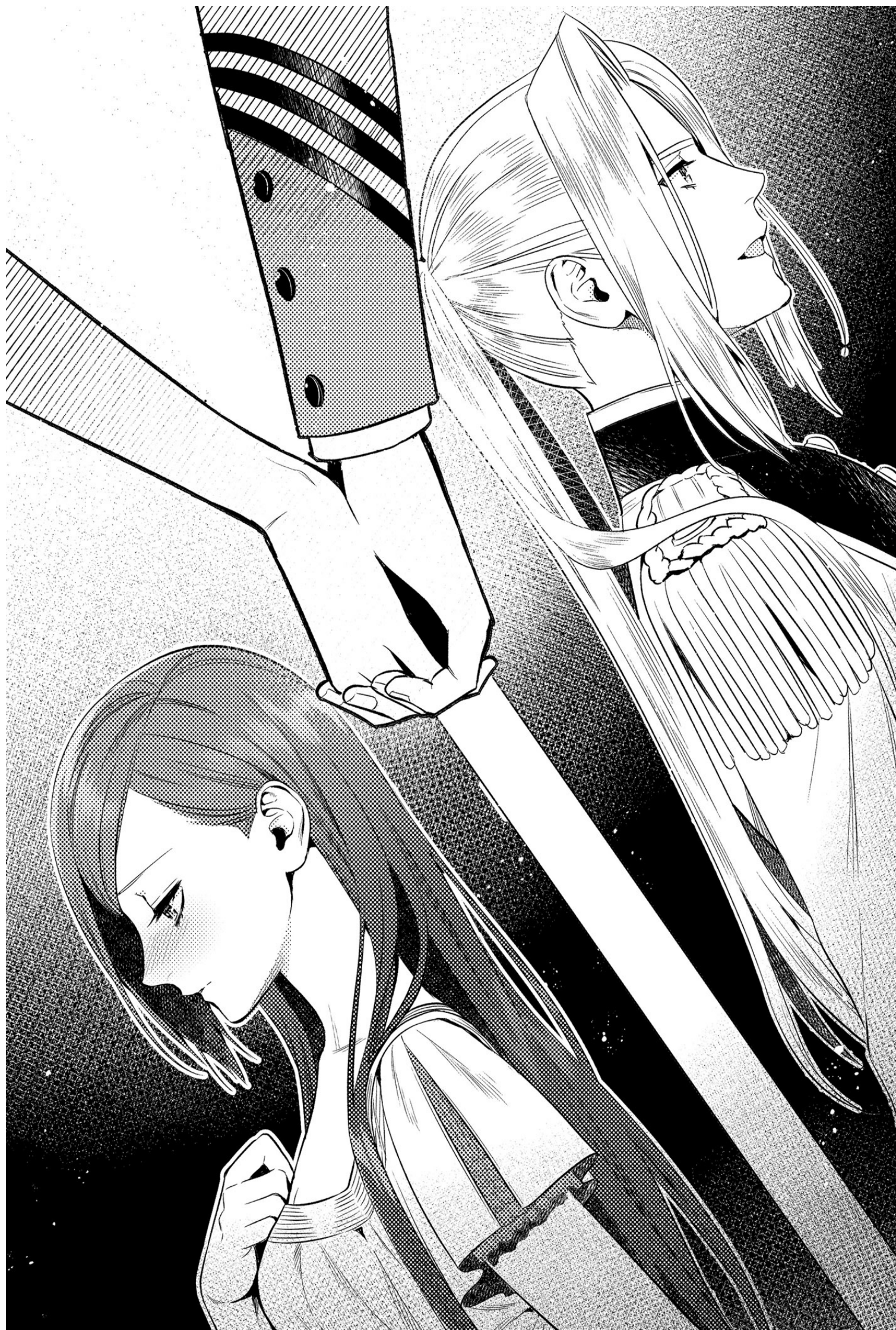
I squeezed a little harder this time so she could feel the strength of my hands. She gave me a squeeze in return and I shuddered all the way up to my shoulders. I didn't expect her to respond like that, but her gentle warmth reassured me.

"You're a really, really amazing person, Princess Pride. You always reach out to me or anyone else who needs a hand and say the things we want to hear. You see us. That's why me and Stale and so many other people believe in you. We'll follow you anywhere."

I thought I heard her suck in a breath to respond, but she stayed quiet.

"So please see us and believe in us too."

Still clinging to my hand, Princess Pride leaned against the wall between us. Perhaps she was finally getting sleepy now that she'd relaxed a little. I shifted my grip so that our fingers were intertwined. Even though I'd initiated this motion, it still stole my breath away. We stood there like that, not moving, not speaking, hardly even breathing. Then we both crouched down to sit on the floor, our hands linked and our backs to the wall between us.



“I’m right here,” I told her. “I promise I’ll always be on your side.”

I prayed she understood how much I meant those words—that I truly was there for her, that I was on her side no matter what. I wanted them to be a ray of light that eradicated the shadows of her doubts and fears.

“Thank you, Arthur,” she said softly.

Princess Pride closed her eyes and took slow, deliberate breaths. I hoped she knew just how many people she had on her side. No matter what happened tomorrow, we’d all still be here for her. We would lift the burdens off her shoulders however we could. I knew Princess Pride loved Freesia and her people, no doubt more than Prince Leon loved his kingdom of Anemone, but we loved her just as much. Her hand relaxed in mine, then her entire body followed. She gave me one final squeeze.

“I love you,” she murmured, her voice thick with sleep.

“I know it’s late, but please address her properly, Arthur.”

I jumped. “V-Vice Captain Eric! How long have you been standing there?!”

When Vice Captain Eric appeared from the shadows without warning, I crawled away from him, trying to hide the crack in the door. He laughed when he noticed my hand interlinked with Princess Pride’s, but he waved off my fumbling excuses.

“Don’t bother trying to hide it,” he said. “I heard just about everything.”

I sat frozen with terror, forgetting to let go of the princess’s hand. “How...how much did you hear?”

Vice Captain Eric smiled awkwardly, scratching at his cheek. “From about ‘Captain Alan’s really strong,’ I think?”

“You really *did* hear everything!” I shouted. Heat rushed into my face. He’d heard everything I said about the other knights. I would never live this down.

“Anyway, you can’t use words like ‘Captain’ and ‘Vice Captain’ that give away that we’re knights. And that hand you’re holding belongs to ‘Lady Jeanne,’ remember?”

My mouth hung open, but I managed to stutter out an apology. This was unseemly and sloppy behavior while I was on the job.

“To tell you the truth, I appreciated that stuff you said,” Vice Captain Eric said. He smiled shyly, seemingly happy to have heard me singing his praises, and I looked away.

“P-please just keep all this to yourself,” I begged.

“Yeah, I’ll try,” the vice captain replied. It was not at all reassuring, but at least he didn’t seem upset.

“Pri—*Lady Jeanne*, I apologize as well,” I said, but my words met only silence. “Huh? Lady Jeanne? Lady Jeanne?!”

I whipped my head around to peer through the door, but there was no response. Then I tried squeezing her hand but, again, nothing. Vice Captain Eric leaned in to peer past me and I followed suit, opening the door a bit wider. That was when I saw not just Princess Pride’s slender arm, but all her long, silky, crimson hair. Her skin was like porcelain, her dark lashes fanning across her cheeks as she dozed.

Princess Pride must have fallen asleep at some point. I panicked, trying to figure out exactly when. She was definitely awake for part of the conversation, so it must have been around the time when Vice Captain Eric reappeared...

“I love you.”

I flushed all over again. Flustered, I bit the insides of my cheeks. Remembering how she said those words to me cast aside all other thought and rendered me incapable of speech. I only grew warmer and warmer, until I thought I might burn to death.

There was only one way to interpret words like that. A mixture of embarrassment, joy, and impending doom warred within me. I gritted my teeth to try to endure it.

“I think Lady Jeanne fell asleep,” Vice Captain Eric said.

His voice drew me back to the present. I snuck another glance at Princess Pride, fast asleep against the wall. She was like something out of a painting,

peaceful and elegant all at once. I quickly looked away, but my face wasn't the only red one anymore.

Vice Captain Eric was just as enchanted.

Her nightgown was thin and lined with lace. It accentuated her slender form and soft curves. The fabric was a bit sheer but, fortunately, the room was dark enough to conceal her. I silently expressed my gratitude for that.

Red-faced and looking elsewhere, the vice captain ordered, "Arthur, she'll catch a cold here. Carry her back to her bed."

"What?!" I tried my best not to yell and wake her.

"You're the one holding her hand. You should be the one to do it."

I couldn't argue. Nor could I pry my hand out of Princess Pride's without some force, since she was still clinging to me. My heart sped up to a panicked flutter. I tried to wriggle one finger loose at a time, but the princess merely grumbled in her sleep and held on tighter with that dainty hand of hers.

"P-please excuse me," I whispered as I readied myself to reach out and pick her up.

I placed one arm under her thin legs and the other—still tangled with her hand—around her back. From this close, a sweet scent tickled my nose. I lifted her easily, her face peaceful as she slumbered in my arms. The thin nightgown was the only real barrier between us. My heart clogged my throat. She was so small, so frail. Yet this body carried so many burdens.

My chest went tight at that thought. I wished she could just stay asleep and not have to wake up and face even more troubles. At the same time, I would have loved to keep her in my arms forever.

Finally, I managed to set her down in her bed and pull the blankets over her. With her head against the pillow, I was suddenly face-to-face with the sleeping princess. Her long hair fell against her pale skin, coiling slightly over her neck. I brushed it away. Just when I was on the verge of pulling my hand away, something came over me.

Gently, I reached out and touched those rosebud lips.

I savored the feel of her soft, smooth skin against my fingertips. That alone was enough to cloud every last coherent thought in my brain.

“Goodnight. Sweet dreams.”

She couldn’t hear me, of course. I surprised myself by speaking those words aloud. I just wished I could protect that peaceful sleeping face at every moment. I knew it was unrealistic, but I wanted it all the same. For now, I had to just quietly slip away from the bed and exit her room, lest I allow my desires to take over again.

Only once I’d left the room and quietly shut the door behind me could I tear my eyes from her gorgeous face. I sighed, slumping down to the ground. Vice Captain Eric laughed and said “Good job” before locking the door from the outside.

“I bet Alan would be jealous,” he told me. “Though Callum would probably say we were being disrespectful.”

“Give me a break,” I said, letting my head hang. My face was nearly hot enough to steam and I couldn’t bear to look up. “She was so...soft.”

The words slipped out as I remembered the feel of her body in my arms. Even now, my hands tingled at the memory. Her skin, her hair, her scent...and her lips. They were all so *soft*. What a fine woman she’d grown into... When we first met, she was just a tiny girl.

“She’s sixteen now.”

Vice Captain Eric nodded, crossing his arms pensively. He would have known the girl she had once been too. “The sounds we heard earlier really were the guards. But there weren’t any problems.” After that, he stood vigilant in front of the door, ready to resume his lookout.

I need to get back to work too. I took a deep breath, hoping Vice Captain Eric wouldn’t see how flustered I still was. Then I picked myself up off the ground.

“I won’t tell anyone about tonight,” Vice Captain Eric said quietly, a pained smile on his face. I waited, sensing something more. “Don’t worry. I swear I won’t say a word until *you* decide to tell someone. Got it?”

I cocked my head. I had no idea what he meant, but Vice Captain Eric just smirked at me.

“So I just told Her Highness that I was there for her. I got real nervous...but she thanked me, so...”

“Want some more to drink, Arthur?”

I was slumped over the table, still clinging to my mug. Vice Captain Eric tapped my shoulder. He filled my mug, but with water this time. I gulped it down with a grateful nod.

“And then... Wait, how much did I say already?” I muttered. “Uh... How Captain Alan’s really strong...and he can use a sword or even go bare-handed in combat, and he’s really cool. Oh, and—”

“Knock it off already, Arthur! Are you trying to light my face on fire?!”

My face was at least as red from the liquor. Captain Alan’s blush was for an entirely different reason, though. He pointed at Captain Callum, who was leaning his elbows on the table and cradling his head.

“Look at Callum! He’s completely gone!”

Meanwhile, Vice Captain Eric cringed at the state of the two captains.

“Captain Callum...is adored by everyone,” I slurred. “He can do anything... He can read people’s emo—”

“Eric! Make Arthur drink more water!”

Vice Captain Eric smirked, but he refilled my mug with water. I chugged it as suggested.

“It’s my fault for not stopping Alan...” Captain Callum said under his breath.

Captain Alan had steadily supplied me with booze for the last hour. By the time Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric had finished cleaning up the room and joined us at the table, I was already completely wasted. I rarely drank past my tolerance, but Captain Alan was another story. He was a heavy drinker and used that to his advantage as he probed for details on the night at the inn.

The liquor left me so confused and befuddled, I had to repeat the story over and over, starting with all the praise for my fellows. The knights around me seemed to get more flustered each time, especially considering it was Princess Pride to whom I'd gushed about them. Thankfully, Vice Captain Eric kept me from going into too much detail about the sleeping princess. The captains took no notice of that.

"Seriously! I'm never making Arthur drink again!"

"I just knew something happened with Her Highness...but I never thought you'd tell us!"

Although he looked a bit shy himself, Vice Captain Eric seemed to revel in Captain Callum's and Captain Alan's discomfort. He was the only one who knew what I'd said to Princess Pride that night, and thankfully he stopped me from relating the core exchange.

When I finished recounting all my praise for the senior knights once more, I continued by murmuring things like "I held her hand" and "She said she loved me," but the other men were already plugging their ears to avoid the embarrassment of everything else I'd said. "I just...think you're all so cool...and awesome...and I really look up to you three..."

"Okay, we get it, we get it," Captain Callum said. "You wanted to become a knight for a long time, didn't you?"

"Hey, the order's full of nothing but knights!" Captain Alan retorted. "Doesn't that mean he looked up to every single one of them?!"

"Ah, Captain, you shouldn't say that right now..." Vice Captain Eric began, the calmest one in the room, but it was too late. I was already speaking over him again.

"Oh yeah, I look up to all the knights," I said. "They're so cool. Not just Dad and Clark. You guys are all totally amazing, Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric... So damn cool. Captain Alan's really strong and you even invite me to spar with you. And Captain Callum, you're so nice. Five years ago, you—"

"Eric, make him drink water," both captains begged.

Vice Captain Eric quickly poured me some more to try and stop my ramblings. I sipped the water but continued speaking anyway. “No, I just really respect you guys...”

“Arthur always gets like this when he’s drunk,” Vice Captain Eric said with a chuckle. “The last time he drank with us, he started going on not only about Princess Pride, but also about all the knights who were there. He doesn’t remember any of it.”

“Good,” the captains muttered at the same time.

Suddenly, a strange voice filled the room. “You sure seem to be having a good time. May I join in?”

Everyone but me readied their swords. I simply raised a hand in greeting.

“Yo, Stale.”

I knew his voice instantly and therefore wasn’t as surprised as the other knights. They all opened their mouths to shout his name, but Stale pressed his finger to his lips to hush the knights.

“I don’t want the other knights to know I’m here,” he said. But this was the firstborn prince. He gracefully sat down in a chair and smiled at the knights. They gaped like they couldn’t believe the sight before them.

“P-Prince Stale, why have you come to such a dingy place?!” Captain Callum asked.

“What the hell, Callum?! It’s not dingy!” Captain Alan snapped.

“Forget about that,” Captain Callum said. “Your Highness, why are you in Captain Alan’s room instead of Arthur’s?!”

“Oh, so this is Captain Alan’s room?” Stale took a look around before jumping to his feet. “I waited in Arthur’s room for a while, but he didn’t show up. That was when I remembered that the knights who joined us on the Anemone mission had invited him to drink with them. I arrived here by teleporting to Arthur’s direct location.” Stale smiled. The three senior knights exchanged a look of pure fear.

“This is perfect timing,” he went on. “I was hoping to join your conversation.

Might I sit next to you?”

In a panic, Captain Callum responded, “Of course!” He offered the seat between him and me.

“You look terrible, Arthur,” Stale said with a mischievous smile. He’d never seen me so drunk before.

Vice Captain Eric tried to step in. “Oh. Prince Stale, right now, Arthur is very —” But it was too late.

“Stale...” I mumbled. “Stale... He’s so strong...and smart...and he really, really cares about Princess Pride...and he works really hard, and he’s so diligent, and he’s amazing with a sword, and—”

“Hang on, Arthur! What’s gotten into you?!” Stale lunged to cover my mouth with his hand. His palm muffled my voice. The other three tried desperately to hold back laughter.

“Arthur always gets like this when he’s drunk,” Vice Captain Eric explained.

Stale’s eyes went wide. Vice Captain Eric slid another mug of water at me.

“Please don’t worry,” Vice Captain Eric went on. “He’s never spoken of you like that until now. Even when he’s drunk, I think he understands that there are certain lines not to cross. Although I did hear what he said to Princess Pride that night at the inn...” With a smile, he topped off my water. “Arthur told Princess Pride all sorts of things about Captain Alan, Captain Callum, me, and even you, Your Highness. It sounded like he wanted her to know how many people she had on her side so that she could rest easy.”

“I see...” Stale said with a nod.

I finished my water, leaned down on top of the table, and opened my mouth to give another spiel.

The game of attack and defense started back up.

“Captain’s Alan’s really strong, reliable, and—”

“Knock it off, Arthur! Don’t tell Prince Stale about all that!”

“Captain Callum always looks out for people, and he’s really smart—”

“Arthur! This is the wise Prince Stale you’re talking to! You’re just embarrassing me by saying those things!”

“Vice Captain Eric always works so hard. He can do whatever he—”

“Arthur, how about some more water?”

“Stale is—”

“Arthur. It’s time to sober up already.”

The prince and the knights were completely at my mercy. Stale ended up grabbing me by the scruff of the neck, dragging me over to the door, and sending me flying out of the room to “get some air.”

When the door slammed shut behind Arthur—a bit louder than expected, really—I strode back to my seat among the three remaining knights.

“Ah... Prince Stale, would you like something to drink too?” Captain Alan said in a panic. “The only liquor we have is the cheap kind!”

I accepted without hesitation.

“I apologize for bringing this up,” Captain Alan said, “but did you come here to speak with Arthur about the conversation he had that night?”

“I did. Well, that was part of it, anyway.” They seemed to find my answer a bit vague, so I added, “I have always wanted to hear from you three, as Arthur’s seniors in the order.”

I accepted the liquor Captain Alan offered. The knights watched me with surprise, exchanging glances, but I ignored their wide eyes and raised my glass.

“Might I hear your honest opinions of Arthur?” I said.

Arthur was a talented knight—the youngest applicant to ever join the main forces, in fact. Excluding captains and vice captains, he was the most skilled fighter with a sword in the order, and he’d even managed to earn the position of imperial knight. He was also the son of the commander himself.

Arthur never shared gossip or rumors, but that didn’t go both ways. I suspected some of the knights envied or resented Arthur for his strength. Even

the proudest of knights were still human at their cores.

“I’d like to hear how you see him and any rumors about him you might have heard from others.”

I offered that last bit as an out, a way for them to deflect blame from themselves. I suspected they’d be more willing to talk to me honestly that way. Though I wore a neutral expression, I watched carefully for any change in their faces. The three knights merely stared at me.

Captain Alan was the first to speak up. “I don’t personally know of anyone who has bad things to say about Arthur.” The other two nodded in agreement.

“It’s true that Arthur isn’t like the other knights, so I understand why you’re curious about his reputation,” Captain Callum said. “He’s more than just Commander Roderick’s son. He is incredibly talented and always works very hard. Plus, he even managed to beat out all the rest to win the position of imperial knight. However, he never stays stagnant. Even within the Eighth Squadron, which is famous for the extreme results they’re able to produce, Arthur’s abilities are very highly regarded.”

“Some of the new recruits really look up to Arthur as well, but none of them are openly jealous of his skills. Nor do they voice any doubt,” Vice Captain Eric said with an honest smile. “Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark never offer him special treatment. If anything, most of the knights enjoy doting on him since he’s the youngest among them. And since they look so much alike, everyone knows that Arthur’s the commander’s son.”

“Whatever the case, I certainly love Arthur,” Captain Callum said. “He’s among the best when it comes to fencing, and we have a pretty good relationship. Not to say I’m not jealous that he gets to be Princess Pride’s personal knight!”

“That relationship of yours is just you dragging Arthur all over the place, right?” Captain Alan muttered. “But I think Arthur is a great knight too. He’s a perfect fit as Princess Pride’s imperial knight.”

Captain Callum nodded. “I agree. Arthur’s a great guy. He’s diligent and earnest. I look forward to watching him grow.”

I nodded, satisfied with their comments. It filled me with pride to know that my best friend was regarded so highly by such fine knights as these. “Got it,” I replied before downing the rest of my drink.

After that, the three knights shared even more with me: how Arthur recently managed to land a hit against Harrison, the captain of his squadron, during practice; how he helped set up the training grounds, even though that job was meant for new recruits; and how he was using more and more martial arts moves during training. I sat silently and took in all these stories, some of which I’d heard before. Once the knights finished, I set my glass down on the table and spoke.

“That’s a relief to hear. Now I—”

Knock knock.

The sudden sound cut me off before I could finish. Vice Captain Eric rushed to the door. He opened it just a crack so the visitor couldn’t see into the room, but after a moment, he sighed and dragged someone inside.

The guilty culprit stumbled into the room: Arthur Beresford himself. “Sorry, I don’t know what happened. I just realized I was outside all of a sudden? Huh?! Stale! Wh-why’re you in Captain Alan’s room?!”

Arthur had apparently sobered up quickly and returned to apologize, but his voice broke as he cried out in shock. Evidently, he had no memory of my arrival, nor of me expelling him from the room.

“I’m glad you sober up fast, at least,” I said with a sigh.

The other knights visibly relaxed upon seeing that Arthur wasn’t drunk anymore and therefore wouldn’t go on any more embarrassing rants.

“I came to ask what you discussed with Elder Sister the other night,” I told him. “And I have an announcement for you as well.”

“What announcement?” Arthur asked, furrowing his brow.

Vice Captain Eric stepped back and I rose to stand right before Arthur. “I received permission from Mother. Starting tomorrow, I’ll be shadowing Uncle Vest, the seneschal. I need to learn from him so that I can step into his role one

day. From now on, I probably won't be able to stay at Elder Sister's side like before."

"Is that why you said what you did a week before the secret mission? When you said I had to look after her for us both?"

He must have been curious about my words that day: *"It's your job to protect her, Arthur...for the both of us."*

"I was supposed to start during Elder Sister's engagement," I said. "But now that it's been called off, that plan was going to be postponed as well, so I went to Mother to get permission to go ahead with the plan anyway. Whenever Elder Sister does find another fiancé—"

Whomp! Arthur grabbed my shoulders. His head dropped, his grip tightening. The other knights shifted awkwardly. Then...

Crack! Arthur slammed his forehead against mine.

"You were holding this all in again, Stale?! You always, always... Ugh! You're no better than Princess Pride!"

I cradled my head and doubled over in pain. Arthur raged on, despite the red lump already forming on his forehead.

"I know there'll be no better seneschal than you," Arthur said. "There's no point worrying about it! It's just one of those customs that princes have to deal with. You really thought I was gonna raise hell over somethin' like that?! Gimme a break!"

Arthur tried to grab me again, but I teleported behind him and kicked him before he could whip around.

"That's why I'm here to tell you about it now!" I shouted.

Arthur grabbed my foot before the kick could land.

"Why didn't you come talk to me before doing all this?!" Arthur asked. "You even hid the fact that Princess Pride and Prince Leon spent the night together, didn't you?!"

"You would've killed him, judging by how you were already acting! Plus, Elder Sister already said that nothing happened between th—"

“But you didn’t know that until Her Highness told you, right?!” Arthur shot back. “What I wanna hear right now is a hundred apologies outta you! You had no idea that nothing happened between them back then!”

Arthur tossed me away, but I teleported again so I could grab his arm and haul him over my shoulder.

“If you were in my position, would you have said something?!” I cried, enraged. “Would you have said she was spending the night in her fiancé’s room?!”

Arthur twisted and thrashed midair, squirming away from me to land back on his feet. His face was flushed red, and not from booze this time.

“Of course not!”

“See?!”

We faced each other, panting from the scuffle, staring each other down. We both stood at the ready, a dark tension swirling around us.

“I’m sorry for...keeping it a secret,” I finally admitted, scowling. “Honestly, when Mother first brought it up with me, I didn’t know what to do either. But I really felt like I’d broken my promise to you, so I just couldn’t bring myself to say anything.”

We were supposed to protect Pride together. But once I started shadowing the seneschal, I wouldn’t be able to stay at her side to keep her safe anymore. Arthur understood that too, and yet...

“You really think you’re not protectin’ her?” Arthur said. “Isn’t the whole point of working with the seneschal to protect Her Highness and the people? Why do you gotta complicate everything?” Arthur sighed and stepped closer. “You’re gonna study seneschal stuff so that you can protect Princess Pride and the people for many, many years. What’s so bad about that?”

My eyes flew open in shock. I’d only just revealed the whole situation, yet Arthur spoke like he understood everything. When Arthur grabbed my head this time, pressing his hands over my messy black hair, it was far gentler.

“Again, I’m pissed that you think you had to deal with all this alone, including

that night with Prince Leon. How could you keep it to yourself?!”

“What of it?” I spat, but I didn’t teleport away.

“Ugh!” His hands squeezed as he struggled to contain his rage, but he relaxed after a moment and released me. Arthur crossed his arms and glared at me.

I fiddled with my glasses. “Well?”

“So, I bet you’re gonna leave Her Highness without givin’ her any warning either, right? That’s the real issue here, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t help smiling at how easily he saw through me. I set a hand on Arthur’s shoulder...then abruptly swept his feet out from under him, pinning him down.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed.

I smirked down at the knight, now on his back on the floor. Since I’d caught him off guard, he had no time to defend himself. He turned his head away from that fake smile of mine, the one he so despised.

“Allow me to reiterate.” I turned to the other knights. “Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric, I’m sure you’re aware, but Arthur and I are old friends.”

Arthur gasped at that and turned his face back up to me. The blood drained from his cheeks as he apparently remembered the senior knights still in the room, witnessing all of this.

Captain Callum heaved a sigh. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Arthur let anyone have it like this. You’re the only person in the world who can talk to the firstborn prince like that, aren’t ya?”

“At the very least, I think we can safely say that he’s the only person who can raise a hand to him...” Captain Alan said.

“I already knew the two of you were friends,” Vice Captain Eric chimed in. “Arthur, I think it’s best to use your words and not your fists when talking with a friend.”

Arthur’s mouth fell open as the knights spoke in turn. Apparently, he’d been drunk enough to forget where he was and who he was with. His face flushed

red with embarrassment. Surely the knights already knew about our friendship, though. It wasn't as though we'd kept it a secret.

"As I told Arthur earlier," I said, "I'll have to spend much more time apart from Elder Sister from now on. Of course, she has plenty of guards throughout the castle in addition to her personal guard. However..." As I trailed off, Arthur clambered to his feet, trying to regain some sort of composure before the other knights.

"That isn't enough to put my mind at ease," I finished, my voice deep and decisive.

The knights all stood up a little straighter.

"My elder sister, Princess Pride, needs to be protected. But if that role is taken by guards simply doing a job or men who only care about their own strength, they're just bodies taking up space. Frankly, I don't want a single person who hasn't earned my trust anywhere near her."

I clenched my hands and met Arthur's eyes, knowing there was hostility in my gaze. He seemed taken aback by my resolve and my willingness to intimidate the older knights. It put Arthur in a difficult position, caught between his royal friend and the knights he served. I hurried on before he could flee to their side.

"The people I trust implicitly are my elder sister, Tiara, Commander Roderick, Vice Commander Clark, and Arthur, who's here with us. Five years have passed and that list has never changed."

I trusted a few other people too: Pride's personal guard, Jack; her maids, Lotte and Mary; Gilbert; the contract-bound Val; Khemet and Sefekh; the fine prince Leon; and lastly, my own parents, the queen and prince consort. But they didn't have my absolute trust like those five select few.

"I apologize for being blunt, but that's how I truly feel," I said with a smile.

I could see them trying to figure out why I was telling them all this. I'd made it sound like I was about to embark on a perilous journey. The knights looked a bit shaken, but I wasn't about to back down. Maybe they thought I should trust them the way I trusted Arthur, but that wasn't happening.

This was simply my duty as Princess Pride's steward. It was my job to be

distrustful and skeptical. I had to scrutinize anyone who might get close to her and eliminate anyone who would seek to harm her. Princess Pride's penchant for mercy made it all the more important for me to be ruthless. My venom was real and necessary.

The knights before me gulped, standing ramrod straight as I appraised them. It looked as though they were preparing for rejection.

"Therefore..." I kept my smile pasted on and looked each of the knights in the eye. "Captain Alan Berners of the First Squadron."

Captain Alan was stiff and sweat prickled on his brow. His previous chattiness had all been sucked away. He looked at me not as Arthur's friend, but as the firstborn prince.

"Captain Callum Bordeaux of the Third Squadron."

Captain Callum's eyes went wide, but he nodded in response to his name.

"Vice Captain Eric Gilchrist of the First Squadron."

Vice Captain Eric swallowed hard; I could practically see his chest thumping. His hands clasped tightly behind his back, knuckles likely white.

And then, as the next seneschal who would hold more power than almost anyone in the entire kingdom, I opened my mouth for a decisive pronouncement.

"I'd like the three of you to become Big Sister's imperial knights."

The knights' mouths dropped open. Arthur's eyes went wide as saucers. None of them spoke, so I simply continued on, having expected this.

"Arthur can't protect Elder Sister for an entire day whenever I'm not around. He has his own duties and training as a knight. That's why I'd like to divide up her protection between the four of you from now on, to ensure the safety of this kingdom's firstborn princess. You'll officially hold the title of imperial knights."

"Um... May I ask something?" Captain Callum said meekly, raising his hand. I nodded and he went on, voice disbelieving. "Such an offer is an unbelievable honor. But why us? I was under the impression that you wanted us to know

that you don't fully trust us." The other senior knights nodded profusely.

My smile widened, and this time, it was genuine. "That's correct," I said. "But Arthur..."

Arthur flinched. "Me?!" he cried, pointing at himself, eyes darting between me and the three senior knights.

"After the elimination mission last year, you said all kinds of things about your fellow knights to Elder Sister and me. It was mostly about these three in particular."

My words and gaze were calm, but Arthur looked like he was ruminating over every word he ever told me about these men. When I started to add that most of the stories were about Captain Callum, Arthur slapped his hands over my mouth. It was too late, though—Captain Callum was already averting his eyes while the other two knights suppressed their laughter.

"I listened to everything he had to say about you three." I brushed Arthur's hand off my mouth and patted his chest. His trust in these men had led to this decision and lent me confidence.

"That's why I can trust you," I went on. "I have absolute faith in Arthur, and he trusts and respects you with all his heart. And you all trust Arthur in return."

I knew they were thinking back on our earlier conversation now.

"Might I hear your honest opinions of Arthur?"

"I'd like to hear how you see him and any rumors about him you have heard from others."

A light went on in their eyes as the knights realized I'd asked those questions to assess *them* and not Arthur.



“That’s a relief to hear. Now I—”

That was the moment they gained my trust.

“I need all of you to help protect Elder Sister—Princess Pride. But it’s still...not enough.” I spoke firmly, conveying my will. “The prime minister is already preparing for the commander and vice commander of the order to serve as imperial knights. If you’ll agree to serve, he will also send the order formal invitations for the three of you.”

The moment I finished, the three knights fell to one knee. Their eyes remained fixed on me, bright with determination and resolve. Feeling pleased, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Let me ask you something, Arthur,” I said, turning back to my friend. He stared at the knights with an odd expression, as though suspecting they bowed to *him* as much as me. “Do you think that Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric would make fitting imperial knights for Big Sister? I want to hear your opinion.”

Arthur started to smile even before I finished the question. The answer was clear. He stepped away from me and dropped to one knee like the other knights, the men he deeply respected.

I want to protect Her Highness alongside these men. His bowed head and kneeling posture conveyed that answer more clearly than words ever could.

Satisfied, I addressed the other three knights.

“I want you three to become the lances that protect Big Sister,” I said. “When she is without a shield, you will be the lances that repel any wrongdoers from approaching her.”

They immediately voiced their agreement.

“Thank you for your help. I know you’ll continue to take good care of my elder sister.”

I crouched down so I could meet Arthur eye to eye.

“You better not let your guard down, Arthur.”

Unlike how I addressed the other knights, I lowered my voice to speak directly to my friend. Arthur looked up at me and we locked eyes. My expression appeared to unsettle him.

“I’m guessing you don’t understand yet, but this doesn’t mean I’m dividing your duties as an imperial knight,” I told him. “Those will increase, actually. From now on, you’ll guard Elder Sister regardless of emergencies. It won’t be anything like before when you were called to her for special circumstances only. You better be ready for it.”

I smirked when Arthur’s eyes widened. “What do you—” he began, but I clapped my hands.

“Now then! What say we celebrate the birth of this new squadron?” I proposed cheerfully.

Captain Alan jumped to his feet. “Hell yeah!” He dashed straight for his liquor shelf to open up the most expensive bottle of wine he owned.

“Hang on, Alan! I’m sure you know not to tell anyone about this until we receive official instructions! You get it, right?!” Captain Callum said.

“Captain Alan, shall I bring something for us to snack on as well?” Vice Captain Eric asked.

Arthur and I rose as well.

“What do you say, Arthur? Do you think you can guard her well enough without me around?”

I flashed a knowing smile. Arthur let out a sharp “Hah!” But his smirk softened when he looked over at the older knights, already filling their glasses with wine. He wore an expression of pure pride, as though he had nothing *but* confidence about protecting Pride alongside these knights he looked up to. I was glad. I’d done my best to choose the best knights I could find, both for Pride’s sake and Arthur’s.

“When it comes to protectin’ Her Highness, it’s not like I’d ever find a better partner than you,” Arthur said, patting me on the back.

The words were more of a shock to me than the soft impact. I found him

smiling bashfully at my side.

“We’re gonna keep protecting Her Highness together, right?”

He grinned and held his fist out. I chuckled and returned the gesture, bumping my fist against his.

“Of course we are.”

His friend...his partner. Those unexpected words filled me with too much joy to keep hidden.

I smiled back with the widest and most genuine of grins.

Chapter 5:

The Dishonest Princess and the Small Party

“WE’LL BE ARRIVING in Freesia in about thirty minutes. Is now an acceptable time for some rest, Prince Leon?”

“Certainly,” I responded with a smile.

Anemone’s prime minister nodded back. I’d been traveling with him more and more lately, as Father had decided to start sending him with me instead of a servant.

Three months had already passed since my engagement came to an end. Pride had requested I make my scheduled visit today. Apparently, she planned to host a small party at Prime Minister Gilbert’s mansion, not the castle in which she resided. I asked her about the purpose of the party, worried that my attendance as the prince of Anemone would be a problem. Moreover, I had a meeting scheduled for the past month that overlapped with the party, so I would be late. But Pride just insisted I attend, and I had to confess that I was looking forward to it now.

“I can’t wait to see Pride,” I murmured to myself.

I could still see her face so clearly in my mind. Her smile, like a delicate flower, filled my thoughts. My whole body grew

heavy and warm, lulled by the memory of Princess Pride and the gentle rocking of the carriage. We still had time before we arrived at the manor, so I closed my eyes and let myself drift off into a dreamy state. My heartbeat slowed, but a single thought made it race once more: By the time I woke, I might be able to glimpse the face of the woman I loved.

“No more! Please, no more! They’ll die!”

Where am I?

“Oh? But why? This is the most natural punishment in the world. Don’t you

think?”

Refusing to listen, the woman cracked the whip in her hands. Yet another bloodcurdling scream echoed through the room.

“Ah ha ha ha! How amusing! Who knew that humans could make these kinds of sounds?”

The devious queen sneered at the bloodied and battered man in front of her, his arms tied above his head with chains. Even though her face wasn’t visible, I could hear the sneer in her voice.

Why am I here?

“Stop it! It was all my fault! They didn’t do anything!”

Ah. That’s right. She called me here...

“They didn’t? Are you sure?”

Her smile pulled taut. She grinned mockingly at me, her cheeks and dress speckled with blood.

“You showed up late to meet your own fiancée, all because you spent the night drinking with your little townsfolk. Isn’t that right?”

It was true. I’d woken up in a tavern, slumped over a table, having had so much liquor that I couldn’t even move. Guards already clustered around me by the time I woke. I still couldn’t get Father’s look of disappointment out of my head. I’d betrayed Father and my people in the worst possible way, and for that I was rightly expelled from Anemone.

“You are forbidden from stepping foot in this kingdom, except on necessary business as the prince consort of Freesia.” It was the last thing Father said to me. But Father was gone now, taken suddenly by illness.

“I knew all about that little stunt in the tavern, of course! I saw a premonition where you were passed out drunk in that tavern that very same morning.”

She lazily cracked her whip once again. The victim this time was a woman. Her shrill shriek pierced my eardrums.

“You...you knew?!” I stuttered in shock.

“I did. I knew all about it. Ever since the very first day I met you.”

Crack! It was a different woman this time. This one begged for mercy, but her cries fell on deaf ears.

“I went ahead and told the last king of Anemone all about how you passed out at a tavern. Pfft. Ha ha ha! He gave in so easily too. What a fool.”

She lashed the person in front of her over and over again, clearly enjoying herself. She spoke slowly and calmly, but with each wound she inflicted on the townsfolk, new ecstasy lit up her twisted face.

“Gosh. Gilbert and Stale are both so useless. How could they give their own queen defective goods for a fiancé?”

Defective... The word stabbed my heart. But it was true. As a person, a prince, and a prince consort...

“Ooh, I might get jealous...”

The words didn’t seem to match her enraptured eyes and saccharine voice. A dreadful chill ran through my body. She took such wicked enjoyment from this whole display. The queen turned her gleaming eyes on me and began to speak.

“Here’s a proposition for you, my dear Leon. If these people forced you to get drunk at that tavern, then that makes you innocent. I can forgive one little mistake, you know. It’s these disgusting commoners who are at fault.”

Her smile morphed into a horrifying grin. Now that her back was to the chained-up townsfolk, they turned their teary eyes to me, shaking their heads to plead their innocence.

“But what if... Hmm. What if *you* were the one who chose to spend the night drinking with these filthy commoners, instead of meeting with your own fiancée in the morning? That would be a betrayal of me and all of Freesia too.”

She snapped the whip against the ground. The crack rang painfully in my ears, making me tense up.

“If it’s their fault, I’ll execute them on the spot. Why shouldn’t I? They laid their hands on the queen’s fiancé.”

Her heels clacked on the cobblestone floor as she slowly paced closer to me.

“But if it was your fault...”

It was. It was all my fault.

I was drunk. I didn't remember what I did with them...or if nothing happened at all. But I did remember wanting to visit the village when my brothers offered me wine. I did remember deciding not to go so I wouldn't bring shame to my fiancé. I did remember drinking the wine my brothers brought me. But then... nothing. I must have blacked out and given in to my desires.

Regardless of the truth, what happened at the tavern was my responsibility. I was the one who hadn't resisted my wicked desires. These townsfolk didn't deserve punishment. I was the one who—

“Then Freesia will invade Anemone at once.”

I froze on the spot. The words evaporated off my tongue and my jaw hung slack. All the blood in my body ran cold.

Freesia...is going to invade Anemone?

“Why not?” she continued. “Your kingdom brought shame to me as queen. Not a single blade of grass will remain in Anemone by the time I'm done with it.”

She leaned so close, there was hardly a breath of space between us. I yearned to reel away from her horrible smile.

“So, which is it? Was it their fault? Or was it yours?”

It wasn't a real question. I could see that clearly in her face. She was forcing me to choose a sacrifice. She didn't actually care what happened at the inn; she just wanted a reason to either torture these innocent people or invade Anemone. And she knew there was no way Anemone could fight back.

Five years ago, both kingdoms suffered a grave loss during what was supposed to be a joint practice between new recruits. Freesia lost all its newest knights and even their commander. Anemone lost many knights as well.

A few weeks later, we discovered the bodies at the cliffs. A landslide had buried everything, making it impossible to tell if the mishap was the fault of Anemone, Freesia, or some third party. Regardless, it fractured the relationship

between our two kingdoms. Neither side would accept blame. During this time of heightened tensions, Freesian knights entered our kingdom and claimed a decisive victory against us. Despite having lost their commander, the Freesian order overwhelmed us and many Anemonian knights perished. In the end, we had no choice but to surrender.

After agreeing to sign many treaties, we brokered a peace, but every nearby kingdom now feared Freesia's might. My recent engagement to their queen was meant to rebuild our broken alliance, but somehow I'd already gone and ruined that.

"Hmm. Which could it be?" the queen mused.

I couldn't tear my eyes from her vicious smile, so stretched I thought her lips might tear. It was my fault. I was the one who deserved punishment. It wasn't... It wasn't anyone else's fault...

"It wasn't me!" I wailed.

My heart throbbed in my chest, pulled in different directions all at once. I squeezed my eyes shut to escape her impossibly wide, doll-like stare. My lips and tongue trembled as I forced the words out of my mouth, hating each and every one as they emerged.

The captive townsfolk gasped.

"You can't!"

"No, we didn't do anything!"

"Prince Leon!"

They screamed and sobbed, struggling against their chains. But the queen's undignified cackle was loud enough to drown out every other voice in the jail.

"I thought so! What else could you say?" she said.

She shook so hard with laughter I thought she might drop her whip. After a long, horrible span, she raised her head.

"Ah. I love you, my dear Leon."

The grotesque expression she wore did not speak of love. She tossed her whip

aside, bringing out a sword in its place. The queen let the tip scrape along the floor as she approached her victims. The prisoners thrashed and screamed, their eyes wild in their bloodied faces as they stared at their redheaded reaper.

“It was all their fault. Isn’t that right?” she cooed.

A metal clink told me she’d gripped her sword.

“Be sure to watch. This is the moment of their judgment.”

She strolled up to the prisoners casually, like she was about to meander through town to enjoy the sights. The townsfolk howled their innocence to no avail.

“Nooo!”

“Prince Leon!”

“Please spare us!”

“It isn’t what you think!”

I know! I know they haven’t done anything but—

“Ngh... AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!”

A scream grated against my ears. Blood coated the queen’s blade as she slashed off a man’s leg. The man convulsed, foaming at the mouth, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Ah ha ha ha! What was that little scream? You call yourself a man? How pathetic.”

She cackled and goaded as though this was a game for her, then moved on, letting the man suffer instead of mercifully ending his pain.

“You know, Leon,” she said, “this woman spent the night with you.”

The woman shook her head emphatically. Her lips trembled so hard she couldn’t speak.

“It makes me jealous.”

The queen’s voice was full of ecstasy in the moment before she plunged her sword into the woman’s body. The prisoner screamed as her blood gushed out

onto the floor, but the wicked villainess stepped calmly toward the next victim.

“This girl too. Ah ha ha, they make me so jealous.”

Shrieks filled the room as the queen assaulted person after person, stabbing, cutting, slicing, and leaving the poor townsfolk to writhe in agony. Her shrill cackling mixed with the death cries of the innocent townsfolk, echoing off the cold stone walls of the jail. I could block out the sounds no more than I could stop my whole body from shaking. I wanted to scream, but fear and horror had stripped me of my voice. These were my people. Anemonians. Innocent people. And she slaughtered them right before my eyes.

They didn't do anything! It was all my fault! Why are you hurting them?! Why, why, why, why why why why why why why why why?!

This was all my fault.

The queen laughed like some twisted nightmare aberration. The sickly smell of metal stifled my breathing.

I wanted to scream. It was my fault. I wanted to tell her to punish me instead.

My throat ached. My limbs trembled. I crashed into the wall, too dizzy to stand any longer. As my teeth chattered, something salty dripped down my cheeks and into my mouth. I realized then that the thing blurring my vision and making me dizzy was the tears streaming down my face.

I'm scared, I'm scared. Don't do this, don't do this, don't do this, don't do this, don't do this! Why them?! They didn't—

“Ahh, I'm just so jealous,” the queen said casually.

Then came another horrific scream. The queen slashed off a woman's arm. Over and over, she muttered the same phrase, like a chanted curse, making sure I could hear.

Jealousy. That was the justification for this indiscriminate slaughter of my people.

“Stop it... Stop it! *Stop it!*”

I forced the words from my mouth, but her laughter and the screams of the prisoners roared over them. There had to be dozens of townsfolk here now,

with their pleas changing from “Help me!” to “Kill me!” as the queen continued her gruesome torture. I squeezed my eyes shut to block out the sight of this hell and cradled my head.

Please let this all be a dream. Let it be a terrible nightmare. Ever since I went to that tavern... No, ever since I drank that wine, all of this has to be a nightmare...

“You make me so jealous...”

I opened my eyes with a gasp when I heard her voice close by my ear. Her nose nearly touched mine as she peered into my eyes.

“AAAAAAAAAAHHH!”

The sight tore a scream from my chest, and I fell to the floor, slamming down on my back. She howled with laughter as she pointed at me, her skin and dress and face covered in my people’s blood.

“Well, Leon, it sounds like they’re ready to die now.”

She pointed her sword at the townsfolk, limp and bloody in their chains, and then she smiled at me.

“But I still want to have some fun. Leon, do you love me?”

Her delighted grin stretched from ear to ear. I shook, my breathing going ragged. I had to summon an answer quickly, before she unleashed even more violence.

“Y-yes, I love you, I love you!” I stammered. “I love you! I I-I-love you! Truly! I’ll never go to that village again! I’ll live however you want me to! I’ll do whatever you want! So p-please... Please...”

Just let them go!

I gulped down that final, silent plea. She would just see it as weakness, which could mean more suffering for the townsfolk. I didn’t care what happened to me; she could expose me, torture me, kill me, anything, so long as she stopped tormenting these poor people.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll forgive you, then. You’re my fiancé and you love me, after all.”

With a clang, she dropped her blood-splattered sword on the ground before me. My mind went blank. She left me where I sat and stepped toward the wall.

“You love me, right?”

Those words sounded like a test, so I bobbed my head over and over again. “I love you. I love you from the bottom of my heart.”

Her smile coiled like smoke and her eyes went impossibly wider.

“Then take that sword and deliver their punishment.”

My thoughts ground to a halt. *What...did she...just say?*

“You said you love me, didn’t you?” she said. “Well, prove it. These people are criminals and you’re innocent. That’s what you told me. If that’s the truth, go prove it.”

The queen crossed her arms and looked down at me. With trembling hands, I took up her sword and rose on shaky legs. The Anemonian people still called out to me: “Kill me... Please kill me... Hurry... Do it... We trusted you... Kill me... Kill me.” Their every word tightened in my throat like a noose wrapping around my neck. My heart hammered in my chest.

“Come, now,” the queen said. “Can’t you see they’re suffering? You can put an end to their pain, my sweet prince.”

I couldn’t move. The sword hung limp in my hand as I faced the townsfolk. It was a miracle they still lived at all after what she’d done to them, yet they met my eyes and begged me for death. They wanted me to hurry, hurry, hurry.

Kill the townsfolk. Kill these people. Kill my people.

A series of grunts emerged from my throat. I couldn’t form a single coherent word, even in my mind. More shameful tears carved paths down my cheeks as I dragged the sword up over my head, aiming it at the very people I’d sworn to protect.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

Red. I saw nothing but red.

Blood splashed my face, drenched my clothes, hung tangy and thick in the air.

I slashed again and again, my arms aching as I swung the sword. Each slash produced an agonized scream, followed by horrible silence.

Again and again and again, I stole their lives away with my own two hands.

“Ah! I love you, Leon. You’ve done so well.”

The queen smiled as she gazed at me. I was motionless among the death I’d caused. My body was drenched in the color of her hair.

“Look at you, covered in the blood of such disgusting women,” she said. “Heh heh... Ah ha ha!”

My blood froze in my veins. Heart racing, legs trembling, I crumpled to my knees. She cackled at my pathetic state.

How could I do this?

I’d endangered Anemone, betrayed Freesia, and taken the lives of the people I was supposed to protect. My hands, which had once touched theirs, were stained with their blood. I still remembered that warmth I felt among them. The decision I made to protect those people had ended in their deaths. I cared about them so much. My people. My precious people whom I swore to protect. No, they were cold lumps of flesh now.

I killed them.

“Until next time, Leon. I don’t mind if you cheat again, all right? I’ll forgive you as many times as it takes.”

The corners of her lips pulled up into another smile. Light filled her purple eyes and reflected off her crimson hair. Just before turning to leave, she opened her mouth one last time.

“That way, we can have another repeat of today,” she said, mirth twisting every horrible word.

I sat on the floor, holding my head in my bloody hands, and the screams finally burst from my throat.

“Ah... Aah... Aaaahh... AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

“I decided to try something a bit different for tonight’s dinner.”

Three months had passed since the end of my engagement to Leon. I decided to host a small party at Prime Minister Gilbert’s mansion. It was intended as something of an apology to everyone involved in the secret mission to Anemone, for all the worry and extra effort I put them through. Prime Minister Gilbert himself had work to attend to, so he wouldn’t be joining us. His wife, Maria, and their daughter, Stella, also excused themselves from the party, preferring to retire to a quieter room in the house. I was sad I wouldn’t get to see them, but they still kindly offered their home as a venue, so I couldn’t complain.

Most of my retinue would be there, including Stale, Tiara, Arthur, Captain Callum, Captain Alan, Vice Captain Eric, Val, Sefekh, and Khemet. Leon, who’d sent the ingredients for the dinner ahead of him, would be arriving a bit late. Feeling motivated, I’d asked Tiara to help me whip up something brand new for tonight’s dinner, something special so I could thank everyone.

“Tiara and I prepared some of this, and the rest was made by the castle chefs at my direction,” I told the guests gathered around the table.

I signaled the maids and they removed the cloths covering the food. A chorus of cheers greeted the sight. It wasn’t just the food itself that excited everyone; it was the sheer quantity of the dishes.

Each dish was something I’d cooked before in my past life. They were commoner meals from another universe. I wanted to cook something a bit more elaborate, but simpler meals ended up being better for feeding a large group. The chefs had seemed shocked—and a bit horrified—by my instructions when I described these meals to them, saying things like “What a strange method of preparation!” and “What exactly *are* these ingredients?!” But I was confident the food would be a hit.

Croquettes, fried chicken, and ginger pork were just a few of the dishes I had planned. A bit boring, sure, and maybe not what one imagined to be classic party food, but I’d chosen based on what I would have wanted in my past life. Plus, these were all easy enough to make from memory. Stew and pot-au-feu already existed in this world, so I steered clear of those in favor of things that

would be rarer and more interesting.

For dessert, Tiara and I had worked together to create a spread of sweets. Honestly, this became our priority. We started with baked goods like mini melon-flavored breads, which included ingredients rarely found in our kingdom. Still, they were easy to make in large quantities once we had what we needed. The whole thing felt a bit more like visiting Grandma's house than a sophisticated party for royalty.

Really, it was kind of a miracle this dinner came together at all. Two years ago, while we were having a party to celebrate Maria's recovery, I attempted to cook something for the celebration. Every single one of my attempts ended in utter failure. Even the most ordinary of foods turned into strange liquid or heaps of ash. Like Queen Pride of ORL, I was completely incapable of domestic tasks like cooking. Just like Pride's last boss cheats powered me up, her faults hindered me. No matter how many times I tried cooking with Stale and Tiara, I never improved.

Now, having caused such grief for Tiara, Stale, and Arthur, I desperately wanted to display my gratitude. To make them happy, I set my sights on besting this one skill that eluded me so terribly.

I initially planned to have the castle chefs do all the work, but that didn't make for a very sincere present. Instead, I decided to put the finishing touches on the food. That was when an idea struck.

"I bet I can cook just fine as long as I'm with Tiara."

As the heroine of an otome game, Tiara's "cheats" came in the form of more traditionally feminine hobbies. Even as a total beginner, she was a very skilled cook and she managed to produce impressive results no matter what she made. I hoped that, by following her lead, I might become just as good...or at least passable.

More importantly, there was a scene in the game where Tiara and Leon cooked together. Leon was just a prince and, by this point, he was already heartbroken and living as a shut-in at the castle. It was his very first time cooking. He struggled at first, but once Tiara joined him the two managed to produce a tasty meal.

My plan was to rely on that same power to make tonight's meals a success—and it had worked. Tiara's support allowed me to temporarily break my cooking curse and produce something more than liquefied food and ash. When I tried again on my own after that, however, I was left with the usual pile of failure.

I nibbled on one of the sweets we made, testing the end result. The moment the sweetness hit my mouth, I wrapped Tiara in a triumphant hug. Tiara, in her usual fashion, happily replied, "You made them so well and so quickly too! You're amazing!" Sadly, she didn't realize this was a one-off miracle that I could only reproduce with her help.

"These are new dishes that I invented for tonight," I said to the guests waiting around the table. "The castle chef made them. Tiara and I made the desserts ourselves. I hope you'll enjoy them after your dinners."

All my guests eyed the dishes with fascination. I clenched my hands into fists to ease the wave of nervousness as I awaited their judgment. When I described all the food, everyone's attention lingered on the dessert for some reason. The appeal of eating Tiara's homemade treats must have been too much to endure. With them so fixated on the sweets, I added, "Of course, you can eat in whichever order you want."

I took a step back and finished by saying, "All right, everyone. Please enjoy tonight's dinner."

The guests immediately surged toward the desserts. It was the last thing I expected. We got carried away and made way too many sweets, but Tiara and Sefekh were the only other girls at the party, so I wondered if there would be leftovers afterward. I never imagined people like Captain Alan or Val had any interest in sweets. Stale and Captain Callum seemed like the types to eat their meals in the proper order. And yet, all of them scrambled to be the first to the table. I wasn't sure whether this was Tiara's effect on them, or if they really just liked sweets that much.

"Damn, this is so good! Callum, try one of these! They're really sweet!" Captain Alan said.

"Alan, don't hold the skewer with both hands," Captain Callum admonished him. "But fine, I'll try one too."

“Ooh, are you going to try any of these?” Vice Captain Eric asked. “They’re incredibly soft and delicious. I’ve never had anything like them before.”

“Yeah, I’ll grab one!” Captain Alan replied. “Oh, Callum, gimme one of those round bread things. The ones that look all stiff.”

“‘Stiff’ isn’t a nice thing to call them,” Captain Callum said as he tore off pieces of melon bread, handing them to Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric.

“Wow. It’s like a shell on the outside, but it’s nice and sweet on the inside,” Captain Alan remarked. “It’s such a nice balance of flavors and textures.”

“Whoa! That’s sweet, but really good!” Vice Captain Eric agreed. “I love this outside part! Callum! Get me more of these!”

“You can go get your own from the dessert table if you want it that bad. Mmm, yeah, I like this one too.”

Captain Callum held a dango skewer. When he plucked one of the three dumplings off and popped it into his mouth, his eyebrows shot up. I couldn’t believe how much everyone liked the sweets. Vice Captain Eric dug in to some dango as well, while Captain Alan was still going on about the bread—an unusual treat in this world, apparently.

“See?! Told ya! It’s sooo fluffy! How the hell do you make bread so fluffy? It’s like a cloud! Wait, *is* this even bread?!”

“I think it’s more like a cake,” Captain Callum said. “It’s sweet and soft and the flavor is so delicate.”

Vice Captain Eric stared down at his dango. “I really like these skewer things too. They’re all squishy. I could totally get hooked on this texture.”

“Really?” Captain Callum asked. “Eric, I thought you didn’t like trying new things?”

“Normally, sure, but there’s no way I’m missing out on this!”

The knights joked like old friends as they sampled the sweets. I started to feel bashful from all their boisterous praise of the desserts. The knights found the foods highly unusual but, in my past life, I could have found these items in any supermarket. Here in Freesia, however, they had to go to great lengths to get

the right ingredients for them.

I was so pleased to see these three enjoying themselves. They would be my imperial knights now, alongside Arthur, of course. They would rotate shifts, but I'd get to know them all quite well.

"I'm so glad to see them enjoying everything! Right, Big Sister?"

I turned around to find Tiara grinning at me.

"Yes. Thank you, Tiara. I never could have done this without you."

"That's not true! I just followed what you were doing. And it was your recipe, so you basically did everything!"

She gripped my hand and pulled me toward the table. "You should have some too, Big Sister! Once we've chosen some desserts, let's go see Big Brother and Arthur. I want to hear how they enjoy everything." A mischievous smile stole over her face.

After Tiara and I picked out a few desserts for our plates, we found Arthur and Stale. They stood side by side digging into cakes and sweets. I searched their faces for disgust. Even when I didn't find any, I still approached with trepidation. They knew better than most how horrible my cooking usually was. Fear, hope, and embarrassment warred as I gathered the courage to speak.

"Arthur, Stale," I said, my heart in my throat. "How are you liking the food?" My chest felt tight as I awaited their verdict.

"It's all very delicious."

"This stuff's really good."

Arthur and Stale replied at the same time. The genuine kindness and enthusiasm in their voices instantly put me at ease.

"That's great to hear. There're still some main courses left, but do you think you'll have room for them? It won't be too much for your stomachs?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

"We'll be fine!" they said in unison.

I chuckled to myself. They really did love the sweets. I couldn't believe it.

“Big Brother, Arthur, please try some of these too! Big Sister recommends it!” Tiara said, pointing at my plate. They hungrily eyed my plate, then looked up to me.

“That’s right,” I said with a nod. “I’d love for you and Tiara to try them.”

Feeling bashful, I couldn’t help but smile. My plate contained a few pieces of melon bread, which I’d enjoyed baking in my past life. It was just a small version that would be easier for everyone to snack on, nothing all that impressive, but I really loved the smaller size.

“I really messed it up last time when I tried to cook for Prime Minister Gilbert’s party,” I said.

My smile turned awkward as I recalled the memory. When I looked at them, I knew they remembered that horrifying past attempt too; no sense in dancing around it.

“That’s why I’d like you to try what I’ve made this time. I finally managed to bake them the right way.”

It really felt like I’d succeeded in making a completely different food this time. It was a nice feeling to be able to present the trio with my second and successful attempt at the snack. I beamed even before they tasted it for themselves.

“Tonight’s party is for all the people who have been helping me, but I made these specifically for the three of you to eat, so it’s the most special of all the desserts. You were so worried about me and ended up becoming a great source of support in my life.”

I turned my face away as the shame rose to burn in my cheeks. However, I could still feel Arthur and Stale’s piercing gazes on me. *What should I do? If they say they don’t want to try that gross, ashy bread they saw, I’ll probably never recover from the embarrassment.*

It was then that Tiara stuck her hand out and plucked away a melon bread with her slender fingers. Her tiny mouth opened wide and, in just two bites, she’d already eaten half of it. Before now, she refused to taste the desserts, saying she wanted to eat together with everyone and not spoil the surprise

while cooking. Now, she hummed around her mouthful of melon bread, eyes sparkling as a smile bloomed on her face.

“Mmm! Big Sister! It’s sooo good!”

Her enthusiastic compliment sent joy surging through my heart. She wasn’t just saying this either; she really meant it. She even stuffed the rest of the bread into her mouth in three big bites. “Mmm-mm!”

Arthur and Stale watched with reddened faces. After Tiara’s emphatic praise, they reached out for the bread—but Tiara blocked them, snatching the plate from me with expert timing. I watched, unsure of what to do, as she hoisted one plate in each hand.

“Big Sister, why don’t you take this opportunity to feed the treats to Big Brother and Arthur yourself?” Tiara said.

“What?!” Stale and Arthur cried out. Their faces flushed an even deeper shade of red. For a moment, I worried they’d choked on their food.

“These are the treats that Big Sister worked so hard to make,” Tiara went on. “I think it will feel much more special this way!”

Tiara grinned at me, completely ignoring the looks from the boys. She was right that I’d made the melon bread with all sorts of special feelings in mind, but Arthur and Stale didn’t know that. To them, these were just silly desserts whipped up by an amateur baker. If I really wanted them to understand what I’d felt while baking this, then maybe Tiara’s suggestion wasn’t such a bad idea.

I nodded and voiced my agreement. I picked up one of the pieces of bread from her plate and stuck it out toward Arthur, who was standing right in front of me.

“Here you go, Arthur.”

Princess Pride was shoving a piece of bread right toward my mouth.

“Wh-what?!”

My face was burning hot. The surge of joy in my chest threatened to topple me. Knowing she made this bread specifically for us was already enough to

overwhelm me, but now she was going to *feed* it to me? I looked at Stale and Tiara for support, but Tiara merely smirked and said, “If you won’t eat it, then I’ll be happy to take it.”

No way in hell! I pried my mouth open with an effort, but I was so nervous that my jaw threatened to lock up. Princess Pride’s very own fingers delivered the bread straight to my mouth.

Chomp. I took a tentative bite. The outer surface was firm, but sweetness filled my mouth. Even after swallowing, that sweetness lingered on my tongue.

“It’s...really good.”

I didn’t know exactly how to respond—I just barely managed to suppress the smile trying to stretch across my face. I really thought it was all going to be over after that bite, but Pride kept holding out that bread toward me.

“That’s great!” she said, offering me another bite.

I have to eat the entire thing like this?

I couldn’t handle it. I just wanted to get the whole thing over with. My face kept getting warmer and warmer and I gulped down air. I closed my eyes, opened my mouth wider, and went for a second bite just to distract myself from the heat in my cheeks.

Unfortunately, I overshot.

Her smooth skin grazed against my lips, and my eyes snapped open. Princess Pride blinked in surprise. I’d gotten carried away, latching on to both the bread *and* Princess Pride’s fingers!

“Oh no! I-I’m so sorry!”

I gulped down the bread and jerked away from her. The same sweetness filled my mouth, but I wasn’t sure if it came from the flavor or the physical sensation of her fingers.

“Don’t worry. You didn’t bite me,” Her Highness replied casually. A flustered smile flitted across her lips, but she had nothing to be embarrassed about. The problem here wasn’t me biting her. It was something else entirely! But she just reached out for me like she wanted to reassure me her fingers were unharmed.

“Hah!”

With that silly cry, she gently pinched my cheek. I held my breath for a moment as her pale, thin fingers clamped down on my skin.

“There. Now we’re even,” she said with a mischievous smile. From such a close distance, that smile was enough to squeeze all the breath from my lungs. Her face was so cute in that moment. “Arthur, thank you for worrying so much for my sake. You’ve been such a reassurance to me.”

My face was already about to burst into flames, but Princess Pride struck yet another blow. *Crap. I don’t think my brain’s workin’ anymore.*

I knew I was probably bright red, but there was nothing I could do to hide so I just nodded in response, too afraid to speak. My heart pounded in my ears. A breath could have toppled me over.

Then Her Highness held out a piece of bread for Stale.

“Here you go, Stale.”

Now that I’d witnessed Arthur’s spectacle, I was filled with dread when my own turn came around. Still, there was no chance I would reject this offer from Pride. Even with heat burning in my face, I opened my mouth for the first bite. Having my older sister feed me made me feel like a child again, which was embarrassing enough on its own. I wished that Arthur and Tiara weren’t standing there watching the whole thing but, really, having Pride there to see this was the worst part.

The soft bread brushed my lips and I took a bite. The outer dough was crisp; it tickled my mouth. I chewed and swallowed, enjoying the softer inside, along with the sweetness of the crust.

“I’ve never had such delicious bread before,” I said.

I intended to say something much more eloquent, but the whole dizzying situation wiped all words from my mind. All I could do was answer Pride’s smile with a smile of my own. It was easier to just keep eating, trying to mask my reaction, rather than flounder as Arthur had. The more I ate, the closer Pride’s

fingers drew to my mouth. My heart raced. Without even meaning to, I went back for bite after bite to finish off the rest of the bread. I savored the taste and was just about to thank Pride again for her efforts when...

“Stale, you’ve got a little...”

Pride’s hand extended toward my mouth. The image of Arthur’s flailing flashed in my mind, causing my body to go stiff. Her delicate fingers approached and gently touched my lips. Then they glided upward to my cheek.

“You had some crumbs on your face,” Pride explained. She withdrew, smiling that enchanting smile again, more beautiful than any flower.

“M-my apologies...” A wave of shame nearly crushed me. My face was on fire. I couldn’t look her in the eyes any longer. I’d dined with Pride plenty of times before, but she’d never physically brushed the crumbs right off my face.

Pride’s fingers...were on my lips!

Unable to hide the flush in my cheeks, I studied the floor instead of looking at her. Delicate laughter rang out.

“Stale, thank you for listening to everything I had to say,” Pride said. “It made me really happy.”

The follow-up blow left me breathless. I was simultaneously desperate to keep my eyes on the smile directed at me and anxious to avoid the devastating impact of that beautiful expression. The conflict kept me frozen, so all I managed was a nod.

“You too, Tiara. Thank you for scolding me when you did.”

Pride stroked Tiara’s hair. The younger princess smiled, relaxing into the touch. She tugged on Pride’s hand and suggested they go try some other sweets. Then the two of them handed their plates to a nearby maid and slipped away to return to the dessert table.

“Hey, Stale.”

Arthur’s voice jolted me from my daze, and I tore the arm I’d been hiding behind away from my reddened face. I found him crouching on the floor, covering his face with both hands. His blush was still obvious in the gaps

between his fingers.

“What?” I asked.

He let out a long sigh. “I’m just so damn happy. I really wanna cry right now.”

“Knock it off. You’re making me want to cry too.”

My throat closed up and I bit the inside of my cheek to hold back. I pressed at my black-framed glasses, hoping the gesture concealed at least some of my face.

“Yeah...” Arthur muttered weakly. He let out another sigh. For two people who thought we’d never get a special day like this with Pride again, this whole scene was overwhelming. I knew we’d both treasure this sweet memory forever.

“Welcome, Prince Leon!” Tiara exclaimed.

“Hello, Tiara. Thank you.”

Leon finally arrived about halfway through the party. I was just glad he made it at all with how busy he had been with his meeting. While Tiara and the knights greeted him, Stale silently slid up to my side.

“I had a feeling you’d invite Prince Leon, Elder Sister.”

When Leon first came for a visit to our kingdom, Stale was on guard around him due to that incident with the kiss. Thankfully, he’d opened up a lot more around Leon since then. I thought he was kind of going overboard, but I figured he was worried Leon would try to kiss Tiara too. Even Arthur seemed on edge around the prince.

“I asked him to send me ingredients from across the sea for tonight’s dinner,” I replied. “Besides, he was part of the whole journey to Anemone too.”

Leon was more than just a part. He and I caused so much trouble for everyone else here when we were in Anemone. I hoped inviting him wouldn’t make my other guests uncomfortable.

“Actually, I’d love to attend,” Leon had responded. “I owe them all a great

deal of gratitude, after all.” He truly was the perfect prince—experienced in high society, sensual, and a perfect fit to be the next king. However, there was one thing about Leon that still left me confused.

“Val! You came!”

“Huh? Leon, you’re here? What a drag.”

For some reason, he really loved Val.

After he finished greeting me and the rest of the guests, Leon—his eyes glittering—called out to Val, who was busy trying all the food laid out on the table. Val had ignored Leon’s arrival entirely, completely focused on heaping food on his plate for Khemet and Sefekh.

Leon, who only visited my kingdom for scheduled stops as part of our alliance, and Val, the deliveryman who only came by the castle occasionally, had little contact with each other. Yet every time Leon came to the castle, he always asked us if Val happened to be around. He even arranged his scheduled visits to fall on days when he knew Val would return from deliveries. I could understand him being thankful for how Val had rescued him from the tavern, but his interest seemed to go beyond just that. Perhaps it was the way Val addressed Leon like he was just any other person and not a prince.

Before things took a turn for the worse, I did explain to Leon all about Val’s past work, the fealty contract, and how he was part of the group that attacked the Anemonian knights five years ago. I was certain he’d be angry about that last part, if nothing else, but instead he replied, “I won’t put any further blame on a man who’s already paid for his sins. He’s the reason why Freesia was able to save our knights, after all.”

I was shocked to hear such acceptance. Then Leon followed up with a whisper. “Well, if he’d gotten any of them killed, then maybe I wouldn’t let him off the hook so easily.” Though he was smiling as he spoke, that addition frightened me just a little.

Leon asked if I could make him an exception to Val’s fealty contract. He wanted Val to act freely around him, no matter what that entailed. I had to refuse, especially when Val sneered, “You wanna die, huh, princey boy?”

But Leon, confident as ever, just chuckled. “I won’t die. Not by *your* hand.”

Silently, I agreed. In the game, Leon managed to defeat Pride. That made him more than a match for the likes of Val.

In the end, I changed the rules so Val could disrespect, lie to, keep secrets from, and defy Leon. Val didn’t seem terribly grateful. Rather, he seemed annoyed that Leon had grown so attached to him.

Improbably, Val now had to contend with both Leon’s *and* Tiara’s fondness for him. He seemed to prefer to just go unnoticed. For the past year, Tiara had been inviting him to her room to serve as Khemet and Sefekh’s attendant while the three of them gathered. But while the children may have enjoyed Tiara’s company, they seemed a bit jealous of Leon encroaching on Val’s attentions. It was almost like a love triangle.

“Hey! Go get more food!” Khemet demanded.

“I want some of this, Val!” Sefekh said.

They spoke up as soon as Leon approached to steal Val away from them, but of course Val’s loyalties remained with the children he’d rescued from the slums. The whole thing was kind of adorable.

“Val, what say we have another drink sometime? I’ve got some nice liquor I think you’ll enjoy,” Leon proposed.

“Only if I don’t have to share it with you.” For all his grumbling, Val seemed to get along with Leon better than most. It was quite a strange sight.

During the secret mission to Anemone, it didn’t seem like Val cared for the prince at all. Leon had said he wanted to thank the man who saved him, so I’d introduced the two. The fealty contract forced Val to be respectful and polite, so he’d bowed low and greeted Leon with all the proper formalities.

However, once I allowed Val to show disrespect, Leon thanked him again and Val revealed his true colors. “I didn’t do it for you,” he grumbled. I tensed at the snide remark, but Leon brushed it off, utterly unfazed. Apparently, he still saw Val as his savior, so the gruffness never got in the way of his affections.

“What are you eating?” Leon asked him. “I think I’ll try one of those for

myself.”

“Do what you want. Actually, you better get your ass over to the other table before there’s nothing left. The mistress made all that stuff by hand.”

“Pride did?!”

Val tried to wave Leon along as he spoke, but Leon turned to me, his jade eyes wide and crystal clear. I hurried to explain that Tiara had helped me make all of this, but he rushed to the dessert table all the same. Not even the perfect prince could resist Tiara’s homemade treats, by the look of it.

The rest of the guests finally had their fill of the desserts, and it was now time for them to move on to the main courses. Only a few desserts remained on the table. I couldn’t believe anyone still had any appetite after all those sweets, but maybe the men could eat more than I could. Thank goodness I’d set aside a little of everything for Leon before he arrived.

“Hey, Mistress, is this one of the things with those rare ingredients in it?” Val asked me.

He stood before the main dishes, snatching food right off the platters. He didn’t even bother to plate anything, eating it directly out of his hands until I ordered him to use a plate. Val paused, sizing up the croquette in his hands.

“No, those use potatoes, beans, and bread crumbs, so nothing in them is particularly unusual.”

Val scowled at me, deep in thought. At his sides, Sefekh and Khemet stole croquettes off his plate and dug in. Val ate just as enthusiastically, even demanding the recipe after a few bites. I wondered if he’d taken a liking to them. Dark-skinned Val struck me as the kind of guy who would enjoy curry, not that I had any evidence to back it up. To begin with, there was no chance of me making curry from scratch in a world without curry powder.

“Certainly, but...are you planning on making this?”

“Do I look like a guy who cooks?” he snapped.

Khemet smiled and called out, “They’re delicious! We can have Mr. Bale make them!” Apparently, this “Mr. Bale” owned a tavern Val frequented. Hopefully, I

wasn't making more work for the poor man by sharing the recipe.

"I like these ones too," Sefekh said, biting into her own croquette.

"You haven't even touched the other food," I told them. The way Val specifically inhaled straight carbs piqued my curiosity. "Aren't you getting sick of those?"

"What else do want me to eat?" Val replied, cocking a brow.

There's a whole banquet right in front of you!

"If you want something to eat with croquettes, try some of this..." I suggested.

I grabbed the triangular food—a carb-heavy item that often accompanied fried foods—and wrapped it around the croquette, then handed it over to Val. He didn't hesitate to dive in. He crouched and wolfed down half the croquette all at once, angling his bites this way and that. He hardly paused to swallow before smacking his lips and declaring it "not too bad."

"Please eat it properly," I said.

He'd been gripping the croquette with both hands, although perhaps it was my fault for handing it to him that way. Val just grimaced with annoyance and plucked a half-eaten rice ball from my plate. He then popped the whole thing in his mouth.

This time Sefekh spoke up to scold him. "You can't just take the mistress's food!"

I sighed. "This *is* a party, so the guests are free to eat whatever they like... Just please don't eat everything. There has to be enough for everyone."

Val just shrugged and heaped croquettes onto his plate. He didn't even glance at the rest of the spread.

"You really like them, huh?" I blurted. Val picked up one of his croquettes and bit into it, ensuring I could see.

"Want some, Mistress?"

He gobbled up the remaining croquette in one bite, then grabbed another one from his plate, making a big show of holding it out for me in a teasing

manner.

Um, I'm the one who provided all this food for you, I thought, but I swiftly took a bite.

It would be impolite to steal someone else's food, so it was only a quick nibble. I raised my head, stole a glance around the room, and breathed a sigh of relief when it appeared only these three had witnessed my impetuous action.

When I looked back up at Val, his eyes were wide and his mouth hung open. It was rare that I caught him by surprise. A warm glow of victory tickled my chest.

I swallowed offered a satisfied little grin. "Yes, that's delicious."

"Talk about nasty," Val muttered, turning his head away.

He sure had some nerve saying *I* was the nasty one. Sure, I was royalty, but he'd done the exact same thing. Maybe he held me to a higher standard.

Val passed along the croquette I'd bitten to Sefekh, then picked another for Khemet. He scratched his head and lowered his eyes to the floor. Had I really made him so angry with that one bite?

I spoke up, suddenly guilty. "Um, anyway, I'll be sure to prepare the recipes for you!"

"What?! You'll let us have the recipes?!"

The shout came not from Val but rather Captain Alan. Once, he was rather timid around royalty. I was relieved to see that he was more comfortable serving as my imperial knight. At the moment, however, he looked flustered by his own shout. "Uh... I mean... Um..."

At his side, Captain Callum sighed, a soup bowl in one hand. "These dishes are all truly delicious," he said. "If you'd be so kind as to share the recipes, we could submit them to the order's canteen for all the other knights to enjoy as well."

Vice Captain Eric, a bit amused by Captain Alan's panic, nodded his agreement. Both he and Captain Alan carried plates overflowing with fried chicken. They were like ravenous teenage boys, an image that left me smirking to myself.

"Captain Alan, this pork dish is really good too," Arthur added.

Arthur had a plate heaped with ginger pork. Captain Alan demanded a taste and so the meat dishes swapped around between the men. Even Stale sipped soup from a bowl. It was like all the men had a single brain cell that was screaming “Meat!” In that way, they were all so alike.

“Stale, aren’t you gonna have anything other than soup?” Arthur said.

“I’m not a big eater like you. This is perfect right now. Here, try some.” Stale held his spoon out for Arthur like a mother feeding her child. I got the impression that he must have really filled up on all the desserts. In fact, he’d eaten far more than he usually did. It was strange, especially because I knew he didn’t have much of a sweet tooth.

After Arthur took the bite offered by Stale, he finally relaxed a bit. He turned to eye up the big pot of soup on the table; clearly he had quite the appetite. Nearby, Captain Callum munched on a rice ball. We did eat things like risotto in my kingdom, but this method of eating was new. It was remarkable to see even a slimmer knight like Captain Callum digging in so voraciously. Secretly, I was pleased to see them all enjoying foods popular back in my previous life in Japan. Perhaps someday I could branch out even more and introduce this kingdom to things like pickled vegetables.

“Everything’s delicious, Pride,” Leon said.

He’d just returned from the dessert table. His plate bore half slices of every single sweet. He said he wanted to try everything but could only handle half portions, so he asked a maid to cut them for him. Apparently, he was a light eater like Stale. I was just happy to see him enjoying all the treats with a big smile.

“What would you say to sharing your recipes with me too? I’d love for the people of Anemone to be able to enjoy this.”

“I believe the knights will be able to make the fried chicken with simple ingredients, so I’d be happy to pass along that recipe, at least,” I said.

Ginger pork, on the other hand, was more difficult to prepare, as I had to send away for the ginger and seasonings. But fried chicken could be made with certain substitutes, so Leon shouldn’t have any trouble with that.

I scanned the room, trying to ensure all my guests were enjoying the food I'd prepared for them. They all smiled in return, their eyes shining and full of light, and my cheeks glowed with joy and contentment. The heat spread through my whole body, leaving me buoyant. I was filled with such despair following my engagement, but now I had not just Leon, but everyone here, all of my beloved companions. Appraising that room full of friends and family, I was the happiest person in the world.

Mother was already looking into how to select my next fiancé—but there was no need to hurry. I had a plenty to work on before then. There was my schooling system, the national mail service...and the man who I knew was still waiting to appear in my life.

The final love interest.

Yes, I still had many things left that required my attention.

A Present For You

THE SOFT RUSTLE of pages turning was the only sound in the room. Mary and Lotte watched over me and Tiara, perhaps looking out for our teacups to empty so they could prepare a new pot. I had nearly reached the final page in the hefty pile of documents cradled in my lap, while Tiara lounged on a sofa at my side with her nose in a book. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric, two of my imperial knights, also watched over this quiet daily routine. Aside from the crinkle of pages, no sound broke the serenity of the scene...until a knock came at the door.

“Pride, it’s me,” Stale said. “I’m sorry to bother you. Do you have a moment to speak? Gilbert is with me.”

I finished up the line of text I was reading before beckoning them to enter and rising to greet them. Jack, my imperial guard, opened the door from inside. Mary set my cup of tea aside—on the usual table as opposed to my desk—then started preparing more black tea for our guests.

“Hello, Stale, and Gilbert too. Thank you for stopping by when you’re both so busy,” I said, joining Tiara on the sofa. The two men smiled at me.

“Big Brother! Prime Minister Gilbert!” Tiara cried happily, setting her book down and sitting up. Stale always made his visits at this time of day, but Gilbert rarely accompanied him. He only joined Stale, who’d begun his work as the seneschal’s assistant, when their breaks happened to overlap.

“I’m sorry. Were we a little early?” Stale said.

“No, I just had something I needed to wrap up,” I replied. “I just finished reading.”

I passed the thick bundle of papers to the men. The stack was almost too much to grasp in one hand. Stale and Gilbert’s eyebrows rose at the sight. Every single paper was a letter addressed to me from a foreign nation.

“Very well. Allow me to take a look at them,” Prime Minister Gilbert said as he accepted the heap in both hands.

He handed half the papers to Stale, who joined us on the sofa. Stale was already grimacing, and he hadn't even started reading the papers yet. The moment he did, his face grew grim behind his black-framed glasses.

““Ever since I met you at the ceremony all those years ago, I've never once forgotten you,” Stale read aloud. “But this sender first met you at your most recent birthday party, right? Rejected.”

“This is...from the kingdom of Veronica? It must be that second-born prince again. He's been sending me these same messages for a while, but ever since it got out that my engagement was over, he's gotten more aggressive.”

“He used to send them once a month, but now it's as many as three letters a week. Pride, since you've already read it, may I deal with it in the usual manner?” Stale said.

“Oh my, just listen to this passion,” Gilbert marveled. ““The slightest thought of you sends my heart into violent disarray, and my tears of love are—””

“Burn it,” Stale cut in, snatching the letter right out of Gilbert's hands.

He glanced at the sender—which included only the name of some house rather than something so grand as a kingdom—and muttered, “Not again...” He then teleported the letter straight into the incinerator. Another unforgiving judgment.

I'd received plenty of love letters of late, but Stale's harsh appraisals always made me wince. I tried to read every single one after Stale and Gilbert ensured they were safe and free of threats, but the stacks only got larger every day. Stale took a more cursory approach than I did, casting letters into the incinerator at the slightest infraction before I could even look them over. The sender's name alone could be grounds for disposal, as could be expected of royalty.

“You're making one of your scheduled visits to Anemone today, correct?” Stale said to me. “May I stay with you until it's time for your departure?”

“Of course. I actually have some places to stop by first, so I'd love it if you joined me.”

Stale nodded and we returned to the task before us, ultimately disposing of

the entire stack of letters after checking the sender and contents of each one. Only then would they have a moment to breathe.

That done, Prime Minister Gilbert excused himself, leaving only Stale behind with me. Stale was taking a longer break than usual today so we could spend a bit more time together. I wished Prime Minister Gilbert would stay too, but he just smiled and politely declined.

“I have quite a bit of my own work to attend to, and I don’t want to keep my wife waiting, so I ought to finish it up quickly,” Prime Minister Gilbert said.

I appreciated that he made this trip to the castle all the way from his family home each day, so I didn’t press the matter. It was a pretty fitting response; he was the type to finish all his work early, no matter how much he had.

We bid the prime minister farewell. That left only Stale, who’d been spending more time with Uncle Vest of late. It was all in preparation of becoming the next seneschal. He had permission to study the duties of the prince consort as well.

When Stale watched the prime minister go, he sighed, looking a little impressed.

“The prime minister’s work sometimes coincides with that of the prince consort’s duties so, as his seneschal, I have a decent grasp of what such a title requires,” Prime Minister Gilbert told Stale once. That did mean the two of them had to work together, however.

When Stale asked Mother for permission to help support the next prince consort in addition to serving as the seneschal, it was Prime Minister Gilbert who swooped in to offer his support. Father had been hesitant, believing such duties should only be taught to the next prince consort, but he ended up agreeing with the proposal. Still, it forced an uneasy truce between Stale and Gilbert, since Stale would learn from him.

Stale blinked a few times, seemingly snapping himself out of his thoughts, and turned to face me. “By the way, Pride, where are you headed today? You said you had a few stops to make...”

I didn’t respond, exchanging a smirk with Tiara instead. Stale cocked his head

to one side, but we still didn't satisfy his curiosity quite yet. Vice Captain Eric and Arthur swallowed and averted their eyes; they already knew all about my plans for the day.

We'd only just revealed the plot to Stale and prepared to head out when another unexpected guest arrived.

"Perfect timing, Val. We were just about to head out," I said.

Val lingered in the entryway before the parlor where we sat, his chin jutted out as he stared at us. Khemet and Sefekh cheerily greeted the group, waved at Tiara, and bounded into the room. Tiara was happy to greet them.

"Here. It's today's mail...and all the rest of the usual stuff. Lots of 'Deliver these to Little Miss Princess.'"

Val dug three envelopes out of his pocket and handed them over, then shoved a separate bundle of letters toward me. The first letters were formal correspondence with the queen, while the more crudely delivered bundle was a collection of love letters from foreign royalty.

Stale let out a loud sigh at the sight. I couldn't blame him. We'd only just gotten through the previous day's stack. I said I'd read them tomorrow and handed the whole batch to Lotte.

"Just let me stuff all this crap in my mail sack," Val huffed, clearly annoyed. "If you're gonna burn 'em anyway, why's it matter if they get dirty or bent?"

"I think we should consider this idea," Stale piped up before I could.

"People took time to write me those letters!" I said, but they both responded with sighs. "Well, fine. I have your compensation prepared. Thank you for your work, Val. Here are the next two kingdoms I'd like you to visit."

I handed over the money quickly, eager to soothe Val's sour mood. Having to deliver love letters in addition to all his usual work made him even more disagreeable than usual. The idea of carrying around sickly-sweet love letters, carrying them close and keeping them safe, seemed to repulse Val—though I could tell he tried to hide that. I could imagine him getting so fed up that he'd chuck them into my room and advocate for a much more "direct" approach to the whole thing.

“I’m still preparing my next letters, so please come back to see me again next week,” I said. “Also...this is for you.”

Val was still pouting as I handed him one final envelope. He snatched it up but didn’t investigate it. Although it had the usual formatting of all the royal letters, it was simply addressed to “Val,” no sender or address at all. He clenched it tight, his fingernails digging into the paper, processing the fact that it was for him. Val raised an eyebrow and showed the letter to Sefekh and Khemet, scratching his head in puzzlement.

“The hell is this? A love letter?” Val asked.

“It’s not a love letter,” I said.

“I don’t need all these sappy words, y’know. It’d be a lot faster to just invite me into bed so we can—”

“I told you, it’s not a love letter! I *know* you heard me!”

Val twiddled it between his fingers. “Oh, did I?” he said coyly. Then he finally relaxed and smirked.

I knew he was just fishing for an explanation. With a sigh, I obliged him, wondering if he’d really forgotten or if he was just joking. As I went on, his cocky smile faded and his eyes went wide. Sefekh and Khemet, in contrast, hopped up and down and cheered.

“If you have no need for it, then feel free to discard it,” I told him.

Val had no snarky response for that. He tucked the envelope and money into his breast pocket, then paused Tiara, who was attempting to lead Khemet and Sefekh away.

“Princess,” he said, “the brats can’t play with you today.”

“We’re leaving? Wait, are we going where I think we’re going?!” Sefekh and Khemet cried, looking up at Val.

Val draped his bag over his shoulder and turned away from the whole scene. “See ya,” he said casually, and then he took Khemet’s hand and made a swift exit.

“Hey! Look at that!”

“Someone go report to Commander Roderick!”

The shouts permeated the carriage as we trundled into the training grounds. I knew the knights would react to seeing a carriage that obviously belonged to the royal family—after all, there were only a handful of people who could’ve feasibly been inside. But even before the vehicle’s door opened, a commotion rose in the training yard.

I peeked out of the window to see a knight, perhaps a new recruit, racing off to inform the commander of our arrival. The rest of the knights excitedly lined up to greet us—or, more specifically, me. They stood up straight and proud, receiving me with the utmost respect, even without the commander and vice commander to bark the order at them.

When the carriage pulled to a stop, an imperial guard exited from a second carriage that followed ours. He approached to open the door for us. Two of my imperial knights exited first, confirming the suspicions of the gathered order troops that I was the one about to address them. One by one, the knights who overheard the fuss began to push their way toward the front of the line in a clamor.

“Good day, knights,” I said as I stepped out of the carriage. “I see you’re hard at work in your training today.”

A roaring cheer rose in the training yard. I blinked at the sheer number of men waiting to greet me, but thanks to the facial muscles I’d honed through years of grueling high society meet and greets, I managed to keep my expression neutral and pleasant. Why were so many of them here to see the crown princess they’d already seen so many times before? Arthur just smirked at my confusion and Vice Captain Eric smiled awkwardly. Stale and Tiara exited the carriage after me.

“It looks like each squadron just happened to be relocating when we arrived,” Vice Captain Eric explained.

Stale nodded in agreement. Tiara joined us, clapping with glee when she saw the energetic knights with their gazes fixed on me.

“I’m not surprised, Big Sister! You’re always so popular!”

“You’re planning to speak with Commander Roderick today, right, Elder Sister?”

I nodded. I was glad the knights didn’t treat me any differently after that whole episode with Leon and the engagement, but there were more than a couple red faces among the throng. Perhaps they were worried this was some kind of surprise inspection.

“Where’s the commander?” I asked.

A group of knights ran off to fetch Commander Roderick. Meanwhile, the whole crowd kept murmuring, creating a din of passionate noise.

“Oooh! Princess Pride’s really here! Take a look, Callum!” Captain Alan said.

“Don’t disrespect Her Highness, Alan! Besides, we’re changing shifts in the afternoon...”

I strained to pick out familiar voices through the noisy cluster. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric were with me this morning, but Captains Alan and Callum would join me after their training session.

“Hello, Captain Alan. Captain Callum,” I said. “Thank you for all your hard work. I was hoping to see you here.”

Captain Alan and Captain Callum shouldered their way through the crowd. Some of the knights closest kneeled. Others hurried out of the way to make a path for the captains. It was clear that the rest of the order looked up to them, just as they looked up to all of my imperial knights. I wondered if some considered them lucky.

Before the captains could kneel or make it through the crowd, they froze. Apparently, it was the phrase “I was hoping to see you” that stopped them in their tracks. Heat flushed their faces and I rushed up to them with a grin.

“I’ve come to deliver what I promised,” I said. “I’m sorry I took a bit longer than expected. I hope Commander Roderick gives his permission...”

The captains didn’t respond. They seemed shocked, even though we now interacted all the time. It was so strange to see them flustered by someone they

guarded every day, but many of the knights still regarded me this way after the incident five years ago. Even Vice Captain Eric and Arthur offered them sympathetic smiles. I simply stood before them, lacing my fingers together and trying to smile brightly as I addressed them.

“I tried to make it easy to follow, but please let me know if there are any problems,” I said. “I’ve already asked the same of Arthur and Vice Captain Eric —”

“Your Highness! I’m so sorry I kept you waiting.”

Before I could finish, a firm voice called over the cacophony. The knights all tensed and shivered before my eyes, but I beamed, relieved to finally see Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark appear from the throng. The group of knights who fetched them remained at their heels.

“Good day, Commander. I’m so sorry to interrupt your busy schedule,” I said.

“It’s no trouble,” Commander Roderick replied. “I must apologize as well for my late arrival.”

“That’s perfectly fine. These knights took the time to give me a wonderful greeting.”

I caught Stale smirking out of the corner of my eye. Commander Roderick furrowed his brow, glancing aside at all the knights around us. Under normal circumstances, whichever knights happened to be around would attend an unscheduled visit from the royal family. However, even I could tell that *this* greeting was excessive. Poor timing, perhaps?

The commander didn’t seem too pleased about the whole order rushing to my carriage from both near and far, even if this often happened during my visits. He sighed, and Vice Commander Clark laughed beside him. The two must have reached the same conclusion.

“Anyway, Your Highness, what exactly brings you here today?” the commander asked me.

“Well...it’s about this. It’s for the knights.”

Although I spoke solely to Commander Roderick, all the knights within earshot

perked up at that. I handed the commander an envelope reminiscent of the one I gave Val earlier. It was simply addressed, “To the Order.” Commander Roderick accepted the envelope with wide eyes.

With my permission, he opened the envelope while Vice Commander Clark peered curiously over his shoulder. Captains Callum and Alan seemed to realize what he was opening before the commander did. Their eyes widened too. Unable to wait, Captain Alan looked at Arthur and Vice Captain Eric with eyes aglitter. They grinned back at him with equal excitement. *Could it be?! they seemed to be asking each other. Is that what I think it is?!*

“This is a recipe I came up with for fried chicken,” I explained. “All the ingredients are easy to obtain in this country, and I don’t believe it will pose any threat to health or nutrition when eaten as a main dish. With your permission, Commander, I’d love to submit this recipe to the chefs at your canteen.”

At first, silence lay thick over the whole training yard. Then a roar crashed down like a tsunami wave as the rest of the knights caught on.

“Princess Pride’s recipe?!”

“Her Highness came up with a whole dish?!”

“And it’s fried?!”

The men all shouted over each other in their excitement.

I’d served this dish during the small gathering at Prime Minister Gilbert’s mansion. Remembering how the knights had particularly loved the fried chicken, I wrote this letter explaining how to make it with ingredients right from Freesia.

Captain Alan’s eyes went bright with joy; the prospect of eating it again had him over the moon. Commander Roderick looked over the recipe, but I was fairly confident the order’s canteen chefs could handle it—maybe even within a day or so. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be too much trouble to add it to the menu for the knights since they looked so eager to get to try it.

I hurried to add, “Of course, I’m a mere amateur when it comes to cooking so if you feel that this isn’t appropriate for the order, Commander, feel free to give the recipe back to me through my imperial knights.”

“No, that’s quite all right,” Commander Roderick said in a deep, steady voice. “I’m pleased to accept your recipe. I’ll pass it along to the head chef, but I don’t believe there will be an issue. We deeply appreciate you coming all this way, as well as your thoughtful gift.”

He bowed his head in thanks. The very next moment, a kneeling knight cried out, “Thank you very much!” Captain Callum, at Captain Alan’s side, had to quickly cover his ears at the sudden shout. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric cheered too, but no one did so more boisterously than Captain Alan himself.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I was so glad Commander Roderick gave his permission for this. Obviously, this “secret royal recipe” wasn’t actually from the palace chefs; it was just my memory of commoner food from my past life.

That knowledge left me feeling a bit guilty in the face of such overwhelming gratitude. “Really, it’s nothing much at all...” I murmured. If I could have, I would have lowered their expectations for the dish, but that didn’t seem possible among all the commotion.

Vice Commander Clark tapped the commander on his shoulder and stepped forward to speak. “This is the recipe that Her Highness took the time to create and write out for the order. I’m sure it will be a great source of energy for our knights. Don’t you agree?”

Vice Commander Clark’s question produced another ear-splitting cheer. Even the vice commander himself chuckled along with the revelry, but he looked a tad bit worried as well. All the knights stared at me with glittering eyes. If they were that excited about my dish, had I just turned their canteen into a war zone?

“I’m thrilled to hear you’re pleased with it,” I said. “I hope you all enjoy the recipe. We’ll be on our way, then. Keep up the great work with your training.”

I was relieved to accomplish my mission and get out of the training grounds. A thunderous roar rose as I returned to my carriage, joined by Tiara, Stale, and the two imperial knights. Once inside, I heaved a sigh of relief; I’d managed to come and accomplish my goal without a hitch. Perhaps the third time was the charm. The knights outside the vehicle all stood around waving farewell.

“You’re in the middle of training,” Commander Roderick huffed at his

clustered men. “All knights, return to the training grounds. Also...”

With a shout of assent, the knights finally turned away from the carriage and stopped flocking around it. The commander looked serious as he paused, perhaps ready to scold the men for forgetting their duties and swarming the carriage. The knights went rigid as they awaited whatever harsh judgment he planned to drop on them, unable to look away. I once again found myself feeling guilty for stirring up the order this way.

“About today’s training,” Commander Roderick began. “If every squadron can produce the best results of this entire month, I’ll ask the head chef to make this recipe for dinner tomorrow. But if a single squad slips up and their results suffer, it’s off the table until next month. Dismissed.”

The commander spoke quietly, but his men reacted in a snap, scattering in the blink of an eye. My visit had surely already delayed them, so they scrambled to make up the lost time. It was shocking to see how efficient they could suddenly be after the effect of my delivery.

“I think today’s training might break some records, Roderick,” Vice Commander Clark said.

“I just hope this doesn’t deplete all our stores of chicken,” Commander Roderick muttered.

Vice Commander Clark, the only person left behind with Commander Roderick, laughed and replied, “That wouldn’t be good.” He patted the commander on the back.

I watched this all unfold from the window of the carriage. I was sure the commander and vice commander knew all about the food I served at my party. My imperial knights must have bragged about my and Tiara’s homemade desserts, at the very least. But this was probably their first time really seeing the effect the dishes had on their men. I hoped the fried chicken recipe I just offered could have that kind of morale boost throughout the entire order.

“I never imagined she’d follow up by treating the entire order to a meal,” Vice Commander Clark said. “Anyway, why don’t we get going?” He rested his hand on his friend’s shoulder, suggesting they follow the rest and get back to work. The commander shot him a look, as though to accuse the man of reading his

mind yet again.

They chuckled before finally setting off, mumbling something about looking forward to the rest of the day. Maybe they didn't just mean the results of their training.

After that, our carriage got going as well. I smiled to myself as we rolled away, imagining all those knights enjoying my simple recipe from another world.

"You finished the recipes already?"

I swept my eyes over Princess Pride's envelope before looking up to meet her smile. She'd come to my kingdom of Anemone for one of her regular visits, escorted to our castle by Captain Alan and Captain Callum. Tiara also joined her.

"I didn't think they would be ready so soon," I admitted. "I'm very happy. The townsfolk will be thrilled to learn of these recipes and try all the unusual ingredients. I'm pleased that Anemone will get to feast upon your very own recipes."

Princess Pride prepared a few different recipes from the party for me, specifically selecting foods with ingredients available within Anemone. With our abundance of goods and active trade, we could obtain things that were harder to get back in Freesia. Also, the demand for those goods would go up, boosting our trade even more. I appreciated her thoughtfulness in devising these delicacies for me and my people.

I folded the recipes carefully back into their envelope and tucked it into my pocket. I wanted to get these recipes into the hands of the cooks swiftly so the townsfolk could try them, but for now, I had to focus on entertaining my guests. But just as I thanked them, a knock sounded on the door. I waved in the servants carrying freshly brewed tea, teacups, and some peculiar sweets that they piled on the table.

"Wow!" Pride and Tiara cried in surprise. Their eyes sparkled with delight at the mountain of snacks. These weren't just Anemonian treats. There were also rare, foreign desserts that made use of the same ingredients as Pride's recipes—and in shocking quantities.

“I managed to get my hands on rarer sweets,” I said. “They pair well with this tea, so I hope you’ll both give them a try. Of course, they’re nothing compared to the desserts you made, Pride.”

“Really, the sweets I made were nothing special,” Pride responded, her eyes bright. She seemed to recognize some of the sweets, but others were clearly brand new, especially the glistening sugar candies and towering treats that looked more like works of art than edible confectionery.

“Big Sister, what shall we do? I don’t even know where to start!”

Tiara covered her mouth with both hands. Her voice trembled with joy. Pride offered enthusiastic agreement as the sisters picked over the array of sweets. They looked like they barely held back the urge to dive straight in. Pride, in particular, eyed them so hungrily she seemed to want to devour them all.

“Tiara, why don’t we split some of the treats with each other?” she suggested.

“That’s a splendid idea!”

“Actually, can we split them in thirds instead?” Pride said. “That way we can all try more varieties.”

There was no problem with royalty leaving behind leftovers, but I grinned anyway and agreed to Pride’s timid suggestion.

“Are you sure?!” she cried, perhaps surprised I acquiesced so readily despite being a royal myself.

“It’s only polite to follow the example of your guests,” I said with a charming smile. Since we had this room to ourselves for the visit, we could split up the treats however we liked without worrying about proper table manners or decorum. “Besides, I’ll be happy to see the two of you getting to enjoy even more treats that way.”

I encouraged them to fill their plates, then rested my chin in my hands and observed. I was pleased to see them return my smile as they stacked their plates. In truth, I’d treasured Pride’s smile from the first moment we met. I savored every little smile, every kiss on the cheek, but it was even better seeing her grin in earnest, no tension or anxiety holding her back.

When she nervously welcomed me to her kingdom that first time, the smile on her red face was as beautiful as a bouquet of roses, and her entire body brimmed with light. Today, as she visited my kingdom alongside her sister, she appeared just as brilliant and bright. She even told me she'd missed me. The more I thought about it, the more precious she became to me. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself.

"What is it, Leon?" Pride asked me.

She and Tiara both froze when they noticed me hanging my head and trying to stifle laughter. It was just so adorable watching them stuff their cheeks with treats. I hadn't even had any sweets myself yet.

I met them with a grin. "I'm sorry. You just really seem to be enjoying your snacks. It was very cute."

Tiara and Pride's faces reddened the moment I spoke. I reacted instinctively, smiling in a way I knew ladies found alluring. The atmosphere in the room shifted, even with the sweets still sitting on the table. The girls nearly dropped their forks and the two Anemonian maids in the back of the room let out soft gasps, propping themselves up against the wall.

Guards peeked into the room. They must have heard or sensed something shift. I gave them permission to help the maids out, but that did little to aid Pride and Tiara. They still stared ahead, wide-eyed, their faces flush with heat. Pride briefly offered a subtle nod in Tiara's direction, looking oddly impressed for some reason.

"I'll prepare even more delicious treats for your next visit," I said. "There's a popular café in town that we can visit too. How does that sound? I hear the baker is famous for his skills."

New maids swept into the room to replace the previous two. I eased up on the charm, letting the girls catch their breath.

"That sounds wonderful," Pride said.

"I'd love to!" Tiara chirped.

The two of them sipped their tea in tandem.

“By the way, how are things with Val?” Pride asked. “I hope he’s not making trouble for you.”

“Not at all,” I said. “We have a lot of fun together. Lately, I’ve begun to get the sense that alcohol tastes much better when enjoyed in the company of others. I understand why taverns are so popular among the populace.”

My smile held genuine warmth. Getting to experience normal things, getting to have a drinking buddy I could be myself around, was a tremendous boon. I knew Pride had her worries about Val, but I loved his company. He allowed me to go back to enjoying alcohol and taverns, even after the traumatic experience my brothers put me through.

In truth, I fell into a deep depression after Erwin and Homer were punished. I recovered quickly, as a good leader must, but my brothers’ exile weighed on my heart. Even in their last moments in the kingdom, they’d only glared at me. Pride had spoken to them a bit at the end, but Erwin merely declared he never wanted to set foot in Anemone or Freesia again—although the alternative to their exile was enslavement. I wished we could have opened up to each other and shared a genuine moment before they left for good but, ultimately, I had to abide by their punishment. It was only just.

“Oh, that’s right,” I said. “As we discussed, I’ve informed Cercis that you’re interested in communicating with them.”

“Thank you! That’s a great help!”

Pride’s face lit up. Cercis was one kingdom Freesia had no relationship with, but I knew Pride was trying to form more alliances with nearby lands. Cercis traded with Anemone by sea. Thus, as Anemone’s prince, I could request an official line of communication between Cercis and Freesia through me. It was all part of my role as the heir to the throne; managing trade relations would be the most vital part of my duties as king someday.

Instead of simply visiting the local village like before, I now sailed on boats, visited other lands for negotiations, tried local products for myself, and observed trade firsthand. I cheerfully described to Pride how fun it was to travel by boat and learn new things. Even in the face of perilous journeys, I took every experience as an opportunity to better the kingdom of Anemone.

Outside of trade, I'd also started discussing the direction of the country with my father, the king, and getting involved in politics. This list of duties apparently shocked Pride, but I wasn't bragging. It was all part of my role. In fact, one of my first aims was to eliminate the system of slavery this kingdom had tolerated for far too long.

"When I look at a place like Freesia, which doesn't endorse slavery, I want Anemone to be like that too," I'd said to Pride in the past. "I want all of us Anemonians to hold our heads high and run the kingdom ourselves without making use of slaves."

But my ambitions went beyond that. Seeing Pride's Freesian school system, I dreamed of one for my own people as well. I had no intention of slowing down when there were so many ways to improve their lives.

"It's the least I can do for you, Pride," I said now, in response to Pride's thanks for arranging the talks with Cercis. "You can ask me for anything you need. I would be delighted to assist you."

I yearned to keep giving back to her, be it food, trade, or anything in between. All I wanted was to be able to repay some of her kindness and be a fine ruler. I hoped my smile and words conveyed that.

My dear Pride, my sworn friend, thanked me, her smile as beautiful as flowers in bloom.

Seeing that expression, I knew in my heart that Anemone's future was just as bright as Freesia's.

"Wow, Val. I've gotta say, this is delicious," the tavern owner told me. "I wasn't sure how it was going to turn out when you first demanded I give it a try."

"Stop eatin' it, you freeloader," I snarled.

The man before me had tattoos snaking around his arms and kept his short hair wrapped messily up in a cloth tied over his head. I'd snuck through the alleyway and down the stairs that led to his inn well before the establishment opened, but he let me in anyway. Not many people knew the place to begin

with. He slid a plate of food across the counter toward me, even as he stole a couple bites for himself. I'd had to force the recipe on the tavern owner—something he'd never even seen before—but now that he'd tasted it, he couldn't stop licking his fingers. The guy finally seemed to get why I'd been so insistent.

"Mr. Bale, please let us have some too! Sefekh and I love those things!" Khemet spoke up.

"Knock it off, Val! Don't hog them all! Give us some!" Sefekh whined.

"You two already filled up on meat earlier."

I set my mail bag down just in time for Khemet and Sefekh to rush up to the counter and beg for helpings of their own. I was doomed the moment they caught a whiff. The tavern owner, Bale, simply sighed.

"You always show up before we're open for 'information gathering,'" he said. "Then you make me cook food for you that doesn't go with booze, and now you're ordering brand-new recipes on top of that. Do I have to tell you again? This is a tavern!"

Bale plucked the cigar from between his lips and exhaled smoke at me as he passed some of the fried potato balls toward the brats. Then he bent to dig out ingredients so he could make more. He set out potatoes, beans, bread crumbs, eggs, flour, and a huge quantity of cooking oil. For better or worse, he always had these on hand.

To the outside world, this Bale guy was just a simple tavern owner, but I knew there was a lot more going on under the friendly veneer.

About a year ago, that shady prime minister threatened Bale into giving up information on human trafficking organizations. Of course, Bale had the goods; he was the crucial connection point when it came to underworld communications. All the while, he kept his own hands clean, at least officially. So when Gilbert went to this guy to make a deal, Bale refused the suspicious offer. Gilbert gave him a good beating for that. Now he mostly worked with me as an intermediary so he didn't have to deal with Gilbert directly.

"If you've got complaints, then put it on my damn tab," I said.

“Oh, I’m gonna. I had no idea you liked anything that didn’t have alcohol in it. This isn’t something you see every day.”

Bale tossed many more potatoes than last time into a large pot. I was about to deny that I liked this food, but I stopped myself. When I thought about it, Bale wasn’t really wrong.

Meanwhile, Sefekh and Khemet were busy digging in, demolishing the pile of croquettes. I hurried to grab one for myself, crunching into the crispy exterior to get to the steamy filling. As good as Bale’s were, however, I secretly preferred Pride’s version. Maybe that was simply because the palace chefs were more skilled or had higher quality ingredients. Maybe it was some other reason altogether. I didn’t want to think about it, either way.

“Since I’m charging your tab, here—have some booze while you’re at it. I know you can drink all night.”

Bale set out three bottles of liquor on the counter. Maybe he was just stalling for time, but I grabbed one and popped the cork anyway so I could drink right out of the bottle. *Drink all night. Yeah, I could go for that.* In fact, I had, just a few weeks earlier.

“I want to be friends.”

That was what Leon said when I asked why he was so stubborn about inviting me out for drinks all the damn time. The more often we met up to drink, the more I felt like I’d been cursed with bad luck to have such an annoying guy take an interest in me. It was downright creepy. I didn’t bother with “friends,” so I couldn’t figure out what Leon really wanted. Still, I had to admit it was never boring drinking with the guy. Everyone else saw Leon as some perfect, flawless prince, but to me he was just obnoxious. He actually tried to keep pace with me while we drank. I thought that might wreck a prince, but he avoided getting drunk just the same as me. Guess that incident with his brothers really sobered him up for good.

Once, I was tipsy enough to ask Leon just when he’d be satisfied that we were “friends” so he could back the hell off.

“Maybe when we’re able to start talking about our love lives with each other,” Leon had said, getting straight to the point.

I'd nearly choked on my drink.

"You know, now that you're making good money, I'm sure you can drink at whatever fancy place you want," Bale told me. "Or maybe you wanna be somewhere in the middle, like right here?"

Bale dished out the fresh batch of croquettes on three separate plates. I just smirked at his recommendation. He had no idea Prince Leon was plying me with Anemone's very best booze back at his castle. It wasn't unusual for the two of us to drain the castle's whole stock some nights.

The more I drink, the more I get used to being around that weird prince. I swallowed those words along with the liquor. Bale just kept on working, plunging a bundle of vegetables into a soup he was concocting.

Bale knew better than most what happened to annoying, nosy jerks.

Clang!

"Hell yeah! I'm goin' in for one more hit, Stale!"

"Bring it on!"

I could hear the bout before I even saw Arthur and Stale sparring in Stale's practice room. The sounds drifted down the hall, only pausing for a brief moment before they started right back up for round two.

I smiled to myself. I knew that they didn't get to spar as much now that Stale was serving as the seneschal's assistant, so I was glad they could still have some time together.

"I'm glad I caught you, Stale, Arthur," I said as I entered the room. "I see you two are practicing hard as always."

"Big Brother! Arthur! Big Sister is here!" Tiara chirped at my side.

The boys froze at the sound of my voice. They whipped around to see me and Tiara awaiting them and went unsteady on their feet. Captains Alan and Callum waited behind us as our guards.

"Hello Elder Sister. Hello, Tiara. You're back already?" Stale said.

“Weren’t you visiting Anemone today?!” Arthur asked.

Stale brushed his hair back into place. Arthur, with wide eyes, bowed his head at the two knights behind me. They both sheathed their swords and jogged over to us, clearly surprised to see us back from our trip so soon.

“Was there a problem?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. The new trading vessel arrived a day earlier than expected. Since our conversation wrapped up at a natural place, we decided to leave a bit sooner. It sounds like trading within Anemone is going to expand again.”

“I’m so glad we got here in time to see the both of you!” Tiara added. “Big Sister was hoping we’d make it!”

She clapped her hands as she spoke and we exchanged a smile of agreement. Stale and Arthur gulped, seeming suddenly nervous upon hearing that we just came to say hello. “Thank you for coming,” they replied in unison.

“Yes, I just wanted to see you,” I said, trying to reassure them. The boys were silent as I continued, “The knights here were really happy to receive the recipe. They said they’d submit it to the chefs right away.”

“Oh!” Arthur cried, snapping to attention. “That’s right! Thank you so much for giving it to the order! It makes me wanna train even harder now!” He then bowed graciously.

Arthur had already thanked me both before and after I made the trip to the training grounds. However, it wasn’t until he and Vice Captain Eric changed shifts with Captain Alan and Captain Callum that they really got to witness the impact of the recipe. Arthur had been stunned by the renewed vigor of his fellow knights. Soon after, he and Vice Captain Eric got to experience that too, swooping in without hesitation.

“Oh, so you think you’ll be able to hit a new record or something?” Captain Alan asked.

“Absolutely!” Arthur shot back. He squeezed his hands into fists at the challenge from the older knight.

“Glad to hear it!” Even with Captain Alan at my back, I could hear the smirk in his voice.

“We’re on duty,” Captain Callum cut in.

I just chuckled at the whole display. “Surely, you’re exaggerating, but I’m glad you want to train hard,” I said. One simple recipe couldn’t possibly be the reason all the knights were so fired up lately.

“It isn’t just the knights,” Stale said. “The palace chefs were pleased too. I’m looking forward to eating your creations again.”

Before leaving for Anemone, I’d gone with Stale and Tiara to submit my recipes to the palace chefs. The recipes were designed around imported ingredients from Anemone. However, the sweets also used a lot of ingredients from right here in Freesia. I’d submitted the croquette recipe I’d given Val, the fried chicken recipe I gave to the knights, and the other recipes from the party. It made for quite the feast.

“Are you sure you’re happy having it this way?” Stale said. “You gave so many recipes to Val, the order, the palace chefs, and even the Anemonian people, even though these were your own creations.”

“It’s all right,” I said. After all, these weren’t truly my creations—they were recipes that came from my past life. It was only fair that I shared them around widely so everyone could enjoy them. But most importantly...

“If they like the food they make with my recipes, and if it makes them think of me even for just a single instant, it would make me so happy!”

A flicker of doubt passed over the faces of my companions. Perhaps they thought I’d given away these precious recipes a bit too readily, sharing them with Leon, Val, even the entire order. But I didn’t see the problem with it. These foods were brand-new in this world; I simply wanted everyone to get to try and enjoy them.

Plus, perhaps the people who tried them would think of me as they did. I hoped it would guarantee them a little joy and that they would recall my smile as they tried the food. It made me happy to think of them associating me with this gift.

As for the men around me right now, however, they kept their mouths clamped shut and didn't respond. It was strange, considering how Captain Alan himself had demanded the recipe right at the party. Captain Callum glared at him like he'd been out of line to do so, but I'd shared the recipe with the knights of my own accord. Captain Alan just scratched his head and chuckled at himself, ignoring Captain Callum's ire. Maybe I imagined it, but a flicker of victory lit up his gaze.

"That's so you, Big Sister!" Tiara said.

I cocked my head, confused by everyone else's strange reactions. Maybe it was a bit much to ask them to think of me every time they had a meal. I should have been satisfied that they'd enjoyed the meals in the first place. I thought of all these people often, but I understood how it could be annoying for them to have to conjure the face of a wicked final boss every time they simply sat down to eat.

Shame burned in my chest at the selfish request, and I stammered out, "A-actually! Please forget what I just said!"

But it was clearly too late. I wanted to scream.

This is the worst! I managed to make food they liked and everything, but then I just went and ruined it! My thoughtless remark could sour the recipes I'd worked so hard to get to each and every one of them. The knights had their fried chicken, while Stale and Tiara had the pound cake, among other things, that I'd submitted to the palace chefs. But what if all those foods were already spoiled because of my selfishness? I searched for a solution.

"Wait," I murmured. "There was one recipe I couldn't hand over."

Everyone's attention swiveled to me and they blinked their eyes rapidly all at once. I clenched my hands, making sure I had it right before I continued.

"What recipe was that?" Stale prompted.

"The bread I wanted the three of you in particular to eat. It was round, stiff, and sweet. Do you remember it?"

Stale and Arthur both flinched. It seemed they definitely hadn't forgotten. A little heat crept into their cheeks. Did they really love that bread that much?

“Um... What about that bread?” Arthur said strangely, as though his tongue had gone numb or something was stuck in his throat. His cheeks were turning pink, and his voice came out a bit firm.

“That one was special,” I said, scratching my cheek bashfully. “I was thinking of you, Stale, and Tiara the whole time I worked on it. It just didn’t feel right to have a stranger making that one.”

I shrugged and smiled. I knew it was a childish desire, but I hoped they could understand anyway. For a moment, they said nothing. Stale pressed his lips tightly together like he was holding back. I could have sworn his glasses fogged up.

Had I said something scandalous by emphasizing that it was special? The boys both tensed up as heat filled their faces. They could barely even look at me. Arthur’s jaw dropped. He grabbed the front of his shirt like he’d been struck in the chest. Were they experiencing a pleasant or uncomfortable embarrassment? And was that someone’s heart thumping I heard?!

That bread was special to me. I merely hoped it was the same for them. That was why I refused to share that particular recipe; it was far too precious to me. But maybe I was being selfish.

“I’m sorry about that,” I said. “I was thinking of giving the recipe to the palace chefs and the knights, actually, so that you two could enjoy it again sometime, but will you allow me to keep this one just for myself?”

For a long, long beat, neither of them replied. However, something in their gleaming eyes made me think some silent agreement had passed between them. They wore an intense look, almost desperate.

Normally, I would be eager to share something like this recipe with everyone, but hopefully they understood why this one in particular was so special to me. Feeding each of them that bread was a moment I would treasure for a long time to come. And judging by the looks on their faces, Stale and Arthur remembered that moment as well, though with embarrassment or something else, I couldn’t tell.

Panic rose in my chest. They still wouldn’t make eye contact, and now their faces were turning a *deep* shade of red. Perhaps my request really was that

selfish and immature. Perhaps it was rude to bring it up at all with the captains right here with us.

“I-I’m sorry!” I hurriedly said to the captains, but neither responded.

“O-of course! I’m still planning on treating everyone again if another opportunity arises! I just...want to be the one to bake that bread, if that’s all right...”

My voice petered out as I attempted to explain. Stale and Arthur merely nodded, while the senior knights snickered behind me, as though tickled by something adorable. Just what was so funny about Stale and Arthur’s discomfort?! Even Tiara was smirking now! Was this some sort of routine I wasn’t privy to?



Nevertheless, I felt especially guilty about Stale. Surely Arthur's fellow knights had seen him flustered at various points—especially considering how open he was with his admiration and other emotions—but very few people got to see the whip-smart, calm, and princely Stale knocked off balance, as he was now. The awkward tension stretched on for at least three minutes before either Stale or Arthur finally spoke.

"I look forward to trying it again sometime," Stale managed, practically forcing the words out. "Please make it for us again."

"Me too!" Arthur chimed in. "Um, I'm looking forward to eating your chicken recipe tomorrow, and the same goes for the sweets, and all the meat dishes too... Or actually, you know, it was all really good!" He sounded a little scatterbrained with so much to choose from, but excited nonetheless.

I smiled, relieved to get confirmation at long last.

"I look forward to it too," I told them.

I sincerely hoped I'd get a chance to treat them both again soon. I wasn't sure when that time might come—especially since cooking was a hobby I kept locked away most of the time—but there was something about feeding the people I cared about that made me feel even closer with them.

These days, far more people than just these two wanted to try my recipes, which I took to be a blessing. Instead of worrying over my future fiancé, who still might appear any day now, I could focus simply on treating my beloved friends and family to splendid meals. As long as I had them, I could enjoy complete and total happiness without whirlwind days of romance with my would-be betrothed.

Still...I hope these happy days can last forever.

With that thought in my mind, I savored the happiness right before me while I had it.

Special Treats from Another Time

“PRINCE STALE, SHALL I bring in some of my favorite

snacks next time I’m here? I know of some sweets that are particularly popular among the townsfolk.”

My pen froze mid-sentence when Prime Minister Gilbert burst into the office with this question. I was here in place of Uncle Vest, left in charge while the seneschal was out on official business.

I furrowed my brow as I pondered the strange question. Was the prime minister seriously trying to bribe me with sweets?

“I’ve simply taken notice of your propensity for sweets,” Prime Minister Gilbert went on. “You seem to be eating more desserts these days, so I thought they might be a favorite of yours.”

I’d always eaten sweets. They weren’t uncommon as a snack served with tea. However, ever since I tried Pride’s desserts at that party...or rather, until I was fed those desserts, I’d discovered a brand-new love for sweets. Even if the desserts weren’t exactly the same, every time I tried one I relived a small

piece of that experience. With all the new work I was taking on, that small reminder soothed my exhaustion like nothing else.

“...”

However, I hadn’t quite realized how noticeable my increased sweets consumption was to others until Prime Minister Gilbert pointed it out just now.

Embarrassed, I bit the inside of my cheek to stymie the heat rising up my neck. Just then, a knock came at the door.

“I didn’t know you were here, Gilbert. Sorry, I just happened to be visiting Rosa,” Uncle Vest said as he returned to his office.

“It’s no worry at all, Prince Vest. With Prince Stale’s help, I was able to quickly obtain my documents.”

“Welcome back, Prince Vest,” I said.

The prime minister didn’t linger to pester me further. After making his greeting to Uncle Vest, he excused himself and carried his documents toward the door. Perhaps he was due to report to Father.

He turned just before exiting the room. His smile did not change, but something sharp and vicious glinted in his eyes. “By the way, Prince Stale...when you come to stay in my office, I’d be happy to prepare some sweets for you to enjoy as a welcome gift. You’re looking forward to it, aren’t you? Once you have permission from the higher-ups to learn all about the duties of the prince consort, I’m the one you’ll be studying under.”

I schooled my face into blankness. This wasn’t simply a friendly invitation; this was a challenge. But I couldn’t tell Gilbert off like I normally would, not with Uncle Vest in the room.

“Thank you very much,” I replied with a forced smile. Feeling a dark gloom roll in, I clenched my teeth to hold back the insults I yearned to hurl.

Someday, I’m gonna wipe that shameless smile right off his face!

Gilbert turned and left, a smug grin on his face as I glared daggers into his back. He might have scored a victory today, but I silently swore he wouldn’t win for long.

Afterword

HELLO, THIS IS TENICHI. Thank you very much for purchasing *The Most Heretical Last Boss Queen: From Villainess to Savior*, Volume 3, or “Last Boss Queen 3” for short.

Thanks to all your support, I was able to work together with Suzunosuke-sensei once again. Pride, the heroine, has finally turned sixteen as well.

This volume is centered around the story of Pride’s engagement. While the content of this “fiancé arc” hasn’t been changed whatsoever, I’ve made a few adjustments to the narrators’ points of view and things like that in order to make the reading experience better. I hope you’ll read through the entirety of this story, in which we learn of each character’s thoughts, actions, and motivations as they deal with Pride’s unavoidable engagement as a princess. I feel that this volume reveals what Pride means to each of the main characters.

The side stories that come with this volume are something I wanted to write for the web version when this arc was first published. I’m really glad I had the opportunity to write them here and now. If you’ve read this far and have particular events or characters that you’ve come to enjoy, please check out the web version as well, which is published by *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. There, you’ll find the story told from different perspectives as well as episodes revolving around different characters.

Suzunosuke-sensei, thank you once again for all the beautiful illustrations you provided. In this volume, there are many that show particularly intense moments in the relationships between Pride and the other characters, and I can’t get enough of the lovely way they’re depicted in the art. Each one is just wonderfully romantic. The scene with the three Ivy siblings is especially beautiful and wondrous. It looks like something out of a fairy-tale picture book.

I’m sure that some of you have also purchased this book thanks to your interest in Matsuura Bunko-sensei’s manga version of the series. The first volume was published in Japan about two months prior to this one and, thanks to all the wonderful details and thoughtful composition, many new readers have come to learn of this series. Anyone who hasn’t seen it yet should give the

manga version a try too. It's quite lovely.

I've been blessed with a wonderful illustration editor and manga supervisor. What a lucky author I am.

Finally, to everyone who purchased this book, those who've been reading the web version, Suzunosuke-sensei, Matsuura Bunko-sensei, those who sent me fan letters, everyone at Ichijinsha, those who helped with publishing and novelization, those who sell this book, the managers who placed my books at the front of the store, all bookstore employees, the editor who supported me, my family who cheers me on, and my friends—I offer you all my most heartfelt thanks.

I hope to see all my kindhearted readers again in the future.



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